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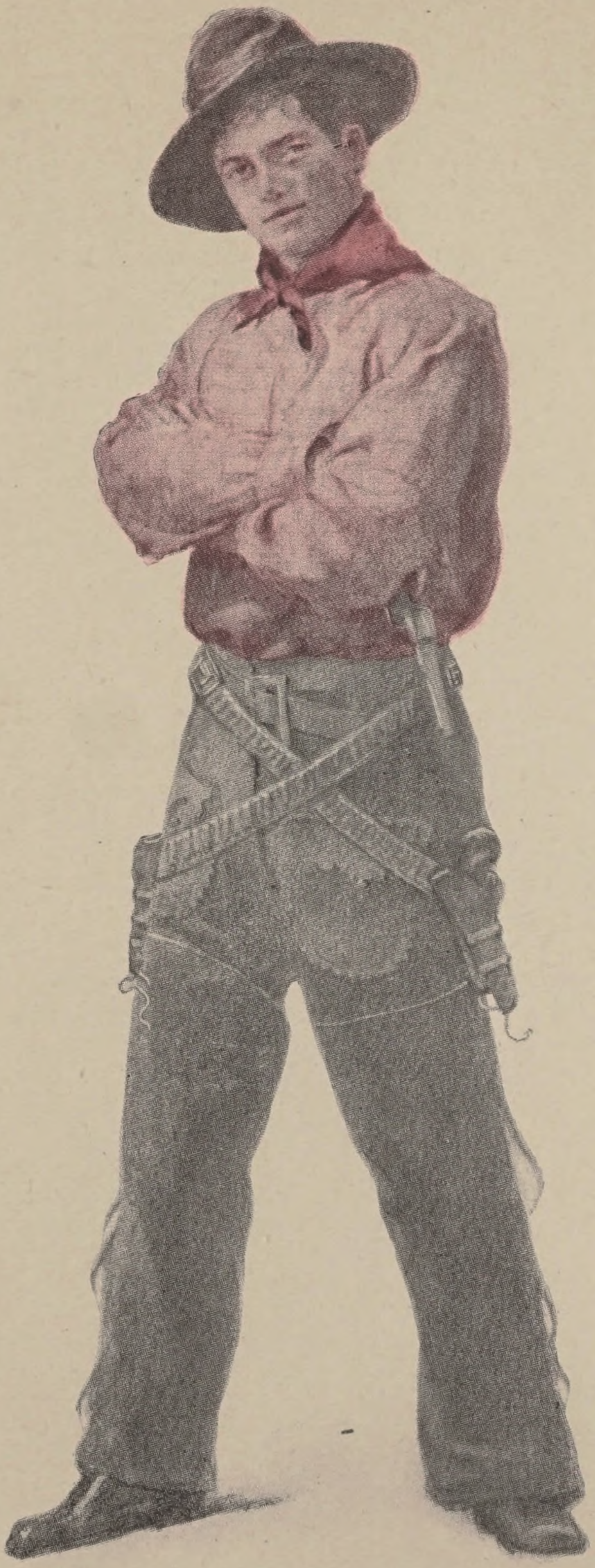

A CHILD OF THE PLAINS

By

WAYNE GROVES BARROWS

Author of "The Law of the Range"

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Dedicated

IN LOVING AND SWEETEST MEMORY OF
MY LITTLE DAUGHTER

RUTH

"WAY OUT WEST"

Includes the following novels:

"THE LAW OF THE RANGE"
"A CHILD OF THE PLAINS"
"THE CALL OF THE WEST"

While forming a series, these three novels will be independent of each other, and connected only through their relation to the old range, the irrigated ranch, and the characters introduced in the first.

The first novel, "The Law of the Range," deals with the war between the big cattleman and the rustler, and shows how the courts were controlled by the latter, who fixed his case accordingly. The second novel, "A Child of the Plains," portrays the passing of the six-shooter; while the third, "The Call of the West," will narrate the story of the New West under the irrigation "ditch," and the inestimable value of water.

W. G. B.

PART I

"When the Six-Shooter Was Law"

THIS Book IS Pure JUNK!

CHAPTER I

ONLY A FRIEND OF THE FAMILY

PIERRE MAXWELL liked the companionship of the fair sex, and when the toils of the day were over he came to the cabin every evening as if it were his own father's. He always had to explain his absence to Mrs. Bartlett, and was treated as one of the family.

But he came with no thought of marriage. When the boys called to see Annie Bartlett, Pierre would never interfere, and she was at liberty to leave him when they came. Crafty Hudson tried to tease her a little about Pierre coming so often to the cabin.

"Oh," said Annie, "but he's only a friend of the family."

So the matter was dropped.

Annie was a very popular young lady, and the boys soon forgot "the friend of the family" in their strenuous efforts to make a good impression. The rivalry waxed hot. Each one struggled to appear at his best as he endeavored to carry off the prize. Crafty Hudson was even allured to the "meetin' house" in his great desire to win the fair one's favor.

But Pierre ever sought her company when she was alone, and if the boys could have seen the little acts by which Pierre and Annie were being unconsciously drawn into relation closer than friendship, they would have exclaimed with sarcasm: "Yes, he's only a 'friend of the family'!"

One evening Hudson asked Pierre, "Goin' 'over home' to-night?"

"Guess I will," said Pierre.

"Come on with us to town; it's Saturday, an' we'll have a leetle fun," tempted the wily rival.

"No, thank you, Hudson; guess I'll go 'over home.' Come an' go with me," Pierre answered, defensively.

"I've got to go to town with the boys."

"You have? You know your failing, and there's only Sunday to sober up in," Pierre warned.

"It's only a leetle game o' poker to-night; we'll all come back plumb sober."

"Bet you five dollars you don't."

"I'll take you," Hudson retorted, as they parted company.

Monday morning Pierre paid his bet. He had lost this time—because the boys were trying to make good impressions on Annie, and they had come back from town "plumb sober."

One evening a little later, Hudson and Charlie Anderson called at the cabin to see Annie. They were disappointed to find her not at home, and went away chagrined.

" 'Only a friend of the family'!" Hudson sarcastically exclaimed. "Shore, an' so are we!"

"But we," said Anderson, with a grin, "are only '*friends* of the family,' while Pierre is 'only a *friend* of the family.' "

"Here I've spent money on Annie," said Hudson, angrily, "an' taken her 'bout everywheres! The 'friend of the family' stays quietly at her cabin, takes her nowhars but hoss-ridin', and spends a very leetle on her! Yet, when she might expect me to call, she goes out with him!"

"Oh, well," Anderson smiled, "she's only a girl. They're all alike. If she don't work you for all she kin git out of you, she ain't a girl, I reckon."

"The other feller, who lays low, always gits the best of the bargain. I tell you what, Andy, these here 'friends of the family' are all right!"

"By jinks!" Andy exclaimed, "I wouldn't wonder if they're engaged already."

"You think they'll git merried?"

"Well, things are certainly a-lookin' that-a-way."

It was one of those clear moonlight nights, and Pierre and Annie enjoyed their ride. They returned home after the old folks had retired, and sat before the fireplace, talking of the happenings of the day. How perfectly contented they felt together! How fast the time flew—suddenly the old clock struck eleven.

"By jinks!" Pierre exclaimed, "who'd a-thought it was that late? I ought to be goin', but 'tisn't every night I kin find you alone."

"Maybe you don't choose to," she answered, turning around and smiling at him. "You are generally with pa and ma."

"I have to be—you're always entertaining the boys."

"Because they come to see—*me,*" she smiled, with significant emphasis.

"Don't *I?*" he asked, likewise emphatically.

"Yes, but when they come, you vamose to some other room, and leave me to entertain *our*—company." Annie's smile broadened roguishly.

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66
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66

"Oh," he smiled, "that's different." He threw a fresh log on the fire. "I would like to see you oftener," he added.

Annie could not see his face. "In public or alone?" she asked, mischievously, after a short pause.

"Both," he replied, earnestly, turning toward her.

"Which would you like the best?"

She had cornered him, and he blurted out the thought uppermost in his mind. "Thar's a rumor that we're engaged."

"Why will people be so meddlesome!" she retorted, pettishly. "The minute they see a young couple together, 'they're engaged'."

Pierre kicked the log, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney. At last he spoke: "They've had us engaged the last two years!"

"By this time we ought to be married, I suppose, just to please people!"

He burst into a hearty laugh. "Yore folks might do a little s'posin' that-a-way themselves, mightn't they?"

"Ma did say that she'd rather have you marry me than any other man she knew of."

He wheeled to her. "What did *you* say?"

"I—I said—Pierre's a fine fellow!"

"Do you still think so?" he persisted.

"More so now than at any other time." And she looked up at him with a smile playing around her lips.

"And you know I care fer you Annie—a great deal."

"Only as a 'friend of the family'!" she smiled.

He gazed into the fireplace in silence, thinking of their conversation. Without the least intention he had approached a subject he would have avoided for a time. But they had the highest regard for each other, and they had unconsciously spoken what was in their hearts, although they had not begun it seriously. They really meant what they had said; even though they did talk in a joking way there was earnestness behind it all, and finally it had developed naturally into something more than witticism.

"I'm such a greenhorn," said Pierre. "You're 'bout the only girl I've ever known, an' not havin' much experience, how should I know?"

"Know what?"

"Know that I love you 'nough to make you my wife? A man's got to have more than just a likin' fer her, Annie. I might esteem you, but what if I'd merry you, and some day I'd see a woman I'd fall in love with—don't misunderstand me—I mean this: I think it's better fer a man not to be too hasty; he ought to know more than one woman before he merries her. Some day he might run acrost his right mate—and then—? I know you love me—"

"How do you know it?"

"Yore actions—yore looks—yore words! If I'd ask you to be my wife, I know you would."

"You think you could get me for the asking?" she asked, proudly.

"I think it would be hard for you to refuse; but I've be'n honest with you. From what I've tol' you, would you keer to be my wife? Would you have full respect for me? Trust in me? When a man can give a woman a house an' clothes, it's an easy thing fer him to fin' one to live with him; but clothes an' things very soon wear out. There's a lot o' men who merry jus' to have a good little housekeeper. Does she respect him when she fin's out? They soon have disagreements an' quarrels. There are certain things which bind a man and woman together; if you merry an' haven't got them things, perty quick you see another that has, an' you're jus' plumb loco fer yore mate. Life's strange. Some men see a woman an' they're shore she's the one. Bimeby they find out thar mistake—when it's too late. It's easy enough to git merried, but it's another thing to git unmerried. That's why I want to be so keerful afore I ask you. I want to be shore that I really love you as a man should love his wife."

She made no answer, but sat looking at the fire. He walked to the table, picked up his sombrero and returned to her. "Mebbe I'm wrong in this deal, Annie, but I'm playin' fair."

"I would not marry any man unless he loved me, no matter how much I loved him," she said, rising.

"I know it," Pierre assented. "I hope you savvy me. Perhaps I haven't made myself clear an' you don't savvy my feelin's toward you?"

"I think you have made it clear to me. How many girls must you study?"

He smiled and answered: "It depends on how much I kin learn."

"Men are strange," she sighed.

"Think so? How about women?"

"A woman is so different from a man," she replied.

"Don't you see," he asked, "if we're so different from each other how we mus' become alike if we're to be one?"

They were walking slowly toward the door.

"Guess I'm goin' at it as if it was life or death. A man might have his notions what his wife should look like; the color of her eyes; how old she should be; but when he meets the right one, even all his tomfooleries are thrown away. You couldn't help showin' me that you love me, Annie. Some day I'm a-goin' to merry you."

"You're not like any of the other boys," she confessed.

"I s'pose not," Pierre said, fingering a rip in his buckskin glove. "They're jus' crazy to git you because they kain't."

"You need a wife," she smiled, putting out her hand for the gauntlet. "Let me sew it." She returned to the table with the glove, sat down and began the operation.

Pierre stood by watching her. He said after a short silence, "I kinder think the boys are gittin' jealous of me."

"It isn't your fault," she said, without looking up.

"No," he said, slowly. "That is, not exactly."

"It's partly mine, isn't it?"

"Your'n? Do you treat 'em all like me?" he remonstrated.

She looked up with eyes full of mischief: "I can't help it, you know, it's my nature, Pierre."

"Oh! you little witch!" he exclaimed, bending and kissing her. Then he realized it was done! She smiled at him with all the joy of her loving heart and he felt how empty life had been before.

"Which is the greenhorn?" she asked, after a pause.

"I take it all back," he said, with another kiss. " 'Tisn't fascination, Annie; it's love!"

They were content to rest in silence, speaking not, but clasped in a loving embrace. They had begun a new life!

The old clock struck twelve, the fire burned low, the room grew chilly, the glove was lying, half-sewn, upon the floor. They sat long, caressing and pledging their love.

The news rapidly spread. The boys all treated, saying over their glasses, with knowing winks, "I tol' you so!"

"An' him 'only a friend of the family'!" Hudson sneered.

CHAPTER II

THE UNWRITTEN LAW AT DODGE CITY

THE life at Dodge City, Kansas, was wild and reckless. The place was a favorite rendezvous for cowpunchers when idle. It was the day of the six-shooter, which apparently was law—that is, it seemed to be the controlling authority in this particular territory. Every citizen carried "a small cannon" in a holster that was tied low on his right thigh—if he were a right-handed man—and he used the weapon to settle such disputes as words could not adjust. At the same time, most of the "killings" occurred at the hands of the intoxicated, and they were dealt with according to the unwritten laws of the range and the mood of the hastily gathered crowd, who acted as jury.

If a man drew his "gun" in some affair and fired from nervousness, he was in deep disgrace. He generally left the town, because he was sure not to be very popular. When a plainsman "let loose his guns" from the sheer breaking forth of his great joy upon "comin' in fer a good time," he was excusable; should a bullet do some damage, the demonstration of joy was sufficient to pardon the rash act, and the accident was quickly forgotten after a *"treat all 'round."*

Just such an incident had happened. The offender was Crafty Hudson of the "Fraser Outfit," and the victim was Charlie Anderson of the "Bartlett Outfit." The latter was well liked, and Hudson had to treat a little extra "to square himself." But Andy was getting on quite nicely, and the town had settled back into its natural state.

It is no wonder that Hudson went wild on entering town after a few months of hard work on the round-up; he was starved for society, and the pleasure made him heedless—society is always reckless!

Andy lay uneasy and fretful on a bunk, looking longingly at his belt and six-shooter hanging from a wooden peg driven into a log of the wall.

"You shore are jus' loco to git up ag'in," Mr. Bartlett said.

" 'Tain't no fun layin' here," said Andy. "But, I'll be darned!" he sighed.

"You won't be long gittin' well," said Pierre Maxwell.

Pierre had left his father's ranch of about two million acres in New Mexico, and blundered into Dodge City, Kansas. It seemed strange that he should leave such an excellent opportunity, but this was a land that asked no questions of any man. Why should he be working as a common cowpuncher on Mr. Bartlett's ranch when he could have gone back to the "Maxwell Empire" in New Mexico and been a prince—if a girl had not won his heart? And there she was attending to the wounded man on the bunk.

Her father had taken Andy into his log-cabin and he was receiving a woman's tender nursing; yet he was eager to get out. Some men would have been only too glad to remain under such treatment, taking the opportunity of wooing the nurse; but Andy knew to whom she belonged and that his chance, or what might have been a chance, was spoiled, and he made no pretensions. He was not the only rejected suitor. Girls were at a high premium in this city and Pierre had made some false friends when he carried away the prize. Although Andy had felt a little as the other losers, he was now a staunch friend of the Bartletts and of Pierre. Their worst enemy had, by his bursting enthusiasm, accidentally brought them together. If Hudson had not been so reckless, Andy would have been in his ranks, and the beginning of the end would have been different.

Thus, when Hudson stood in the doorway with as pleasant a smile as you ever saw, asking how Andy was, the latter replied: "Won't be long 'fore I kin put you whar I am!"

Hudson entered, wearing the same dangerous smile, unbuckled his cartridge belt and hung it with the heavy six-shooter on a wooden peg near the door, meaning, of course, that he gave the law into other hands and they could deal with him just as they pleased; he was before "the jury," calm, smiling, helpless, but perfectly confident, with the iron nerve of an Indian.

"I hope you won't lay 't up ag'in me," he said, after a short pause. "I'll allow I was a leetle too gay with my 'guns.' "

"I don't lay the casualty up ag'in you, Crafty," said Anderson, " 'cause a feller kain't help lettin' loose his 'guns' onct in awhile: if he couldn't, what's the use of havin' any? Besides, we mus' keep 'the law' in good practice. But next time, don't be so careless!"

"Wal, you see, gentlemen," said Hudson,

jokingly, "I didn't 'member loadin' my 'guns'; I thought I had emptied 'em comin' in. I shorely didn't know," he grinned.

"Ignorance of the law don't excuse anyone," said Mr. Bartlett.

Hudson was smiling as serenely as ever. "Not when you take the law" (pointing to the revolver hanging on the wall) "in yer own han's. I'll do better nex' time!" he burst out.

Pierre kept his eyes on the artful expression of the speaker's face and saw deeper meaning to the words than they at first conveyed, because Hudson was looking straight at him when he spoke, as if he intended to have revenge. They stood looking at each other, these two rivals, speaking not a word. Then suddenly Pierre saw through the trick of Hudson.

"Crafty," said he, half-closing his left eye, "you've earned yore name—kin savvy?"

"Not very well."

"You're a cunnin' devil!"

"This ain't the place to tell me!"

"Then don't come 'roun' here playin' frien'. Mr. Bartlett, you have a daughter, an' some of the boys would like to merry her. Now, it happens I'm the lucky feller. S'posin' Hudson would wish to put me out o' the way. Couldn't he come ridin' down the street with 'is 'guns' smokin' an' by a tricky shot get in a ball fer me? The citizens would think it was an accident. Don't it strike you kinder queer? An' wouldn't it be easy to bribe the jury? Wouldn't it? Mr. Bartlett, what do you think of a genuine ranger, dead-shot and shrewd scoundrel tryin' to kill a man on the street by such an amateurish trick? Don't it strike you queer? What do you think of Crafty Hudson woundin' a man by an accident? A tenderfoot might be excused, but to think of such poor 'gun-play' from Hudson is astonishin', when he was plumb sober! I'll bet you the bullet Andy got was meant fer me. Min' you, Crafty had to shoot quick an' sly so as not to rouse suspicion, an' I was lucky 'nough to escape injury."

"You kain't prove it, jus' the same," said Hudson. "But you've got to pay fer what you've said—Mr. Bartlett, I'll leave my 'gun' hangin' on yore wall till I kin git it with the consent of the court."

"Just a minute," said the rancher, as Hudson was about to go out. "I advise you to keep still, 'cause we may git more facts in the case, an' make it mighty unpleasant fer you. Crafty, the bes' thing fer you is to leave town."

Hudson swore defiantly.

"If you don't leave, we'll make you feel a d—n sight queer!" Mr. Bartlett went on. "Take yore 'gun' from my wall, an' git!"

Hudson walked over to the wall and took down his six-shooter, carrying it by the belt and letting the weapon hang in its holster almost to the floor. How much he reminded them of a punished school-boy that was being sent home with his books swinging from a strap. Hudson held his revolver thus to show to the others that he designed no drawing of the "gun" from its leathern sheath, because it would be impossible (when Bartlett and Pierre could jerk loose theirs from the firmly tied holsters hanging low down on their thighs) to reach the trailing weapon. He had the name of "Crafty," so the other plainsmen's thumbs rested lightly on their belts, and very near to the holsters; they were prepared to meet any artifice that Hudson might spring with the devil's inspiration.

"A-look here!" Hudson exclaimed, trembling with passion, "youse fellers have got the drop on me an' I've got to do what you say. I'm a-goin' to leave town—but not 'cause you ordered me. I was on my way out afore I come here, an' jus' stopped in to see how Andy was gittin' on. You have put up the cards on me afore the game, but I hol' a good han', too; I'll play you to the finish! Ef you think I'm goin' to dodge fight, you're mighty fools, an' if yore story gits 'round town, I'll come in an' settle with you!"

He went out, mounted his broncho, and rode away. They ceased to think of him.

One night, about a month later, Pierre paused to look around him as he approached Mr. Bartlett's cabin. Far away the lights of Dodge City looked like dots of red fire. How much brighter was the light which streamed through the cabin window not fifty feet away. It was *her* window! Soon he would be lightly rapping on it. Then her face would smile sweetly out at him and she would open the barrier to receive his caress.

He was stepping quickly toward the cabin when he heard an angry voice, but he could not make out what was said. Crouching beside the wall, he applied his ear to a crack between the logs where the chinking had fallen out.

The door opened and Pierre shrank back. In the light streaming from within stood that man who made his blood boil; and he would have jumped like a panther upon Hudson had not the door closed with a loud bang, leaving him cursing, as the heavy bars were drawn by the same hand which had pushed him from the entrance.

"Lemme in," Hudson growled, pounding with his big fist.

Pierre's pistol flashed in the light that radiated from the window as he stepped out and covered Hudson, commanding: "Git 'way from that door!"

"So you've be'n eavesdropping!" sneered Hudson.

"I overheard you insultin' Annie, an' threatenin' my life. You better stay clear o' this cabin, you dirty cur!—you bark too loud to bite!"

Hudson's eyes flashed like an angry serpent's ready to strike, and he hissed: "When I git the chance, I'll jus' kill you!"

"I'll be ready to shoot on sight, Hudson, you hear me! I'll take yore bluff! Take off yore 'guns.' " Hudson unbuckled the belt which held his weapons and let it drop. Pierre continued: "Crafty, the sheriff wants to see you, an' if you don't show up by to-morrow mornin', we'll be lookin' fer you with a long rope. Now, git out o' here, an' be quick!"

Hudson hesitated, but a pistol offers a strong argument, and he turned slowly and followed the direction of Pierre's finger pointing toward the town.

The next morning as the boys rode out to work on the Bartlett ranch, Andy told them that Hudson was in town. He did not know of Hudson's appearance at the cabin the night before.

"Where'd you see him?" asked Pierre. He had commanded Crafty Hudson to see the sheriff, and possibly Hudson had disobeyed.

"At the 'Red Apple,'" Andy replied. "He came in las' night, irrigated too much an' got noisy. 'Zay,' he says to me, 'you know that cow-puncher over at Bartlett's the biggest coward that ever packed a gun?' Says he, 'I kin lick Pierre Maxwell with my little finger! He's a tryin' to steal my girl on me; if he does, I'm a-goin' to lay fer him. Zay, partner, what'll you have?' 'I'll take yore heart if you don't shut up,' says I. 'Zay, partner, don't you do't, 'cause I kin lick anybudy in the worl',' says he. I knows that when a galoot has got whiskey in him, he's a dangerous shot, so I turns to the barkeeper an' orders drinks fer two. Hudson sort of swayed from side to side, blinkin' his eyes like an owl in daylight, an' says: 'Don't keer ef I do, pard.' He swallowed the drink. Then he treats. I drunk little 'cause I was playin' off: I wanted to fix him fer puttin' this hole in me. When Crafty couldn't hol' a glass to his mouth, I gets a jug from the barkeeper an' simply pours whiskey down Crafty till he falls paralyzed to the floor!"

"Where is he?" Pierre asked.

"Where is he?" Andy laughed. "Ha! ha! ha! He's dead to the worl' jus' now! I'd like to put him out o' the way so s't he kain't do you no dirty work."

"Don't you worry," said Pierre, "I'll always be ready! 'Lick anybody in the world.' Ha! ha! ha! Andy, but you laid him out cold, you shorely did!"

Hudson disappeared; but everyone was on the watch for him, feeling that he might play some deviltry when least expected; he was not the one to be beaten so easily.

"I'm afraid he'll kill you, Pierre," said Annie one night as they sat in front of the cabin. "I feel every time I see you go into the darkness that every shadow's got a gun pointing at your back."

Pierre felt somewhat that way himself, but he tried to dispel her fear. "We'll ketch him soon," said he. "The sheriff an' all of us are lookin' fer him."

"Yes, but he might harm you before you can catch him."

"He'll have hard work to git a chance at me in daylight, an' I'll lay low at night, so's he kain't git the drop on me."

"I feel uneasy sitting here; Hudson might be hiding and it would not be hard for him to shoot you. Let's go in an' put out the light," she said, drawing him toward the door.

"Guess this is a case where a man ought to be glad he's livin'," Pierre said, reluctantly following her. "I hate to go dodgin' in my hole like a scared prairie-dog."

" 'Tain't 'cause you're scared, but it's just to cheat Hudson. He's just crafty enough to know that you would naturally be fool enough to strut around like a game-cock, crowing and flapping your wings for fight, while he hides behind some brush and coolly shoots you in the back. If you love me, Pierre, don't be reckless."

"I won't," he said, tightening his hold on her hand.

"You'll promise?" she asked, turning at the door.

"You kin bank on it," he reassured.

"I know it goes against your grain to sneak around Hudson, but it's for the best, sweetheart; you must play a coward at his own game."

"Guess I'll have to git a whiskey jug, like Andy done." And Pierre laughed at the recollection.

She pushed open the door and they went in. Annie put out the light and they talked in security.

Things went on this way for some time, and, hearing nothing of the whereabouts of Hudson, although Annie warned Pierre time and time again, he began to grow more heedless every day. One night, against her many protests, he went so far as to light the lamp and sit under its bright rays to write a letter.

Annie took the precaution to hang heavy blankets over the windows, and sat beside Pierre, resting her elbows upon the table, her chin supported in her clasped hands.

Pierre looked up from his work, saw her

watching him and he smiled. He was surprised to discover how womanly she had become, and his whole being quivered with the passion of love!

No wonder that under its power the girl became unwary and in such a sacred moment she left her lover's life unguarded. The thud of a horse's hoof-beats upon the sandy road quickly brought her to her feet, and she extinguished the light.

The rider pulled up his little pony before the cabin, threw the reins over the tossing head, dismounted and walked toward the door. He rapped.

"Who's there?" Annie asked.

"The sheriff," was the reply.

The girl withdrew the heavy bars, opened the door, keeping it in front of her for a shield. In the doorway stood a dark form. After a pause, Annie asked: "What is it, sheriff?"

"Are you alone?" inquired the voice.

"You're not the sheriff," she replied, swinging the heavy plank door into his face.

"Ha!" Hudson exclaimed, stopping the force of the door with his boot, "not so quick, you hussy! Lemme in, or I'll break in."

Pierre threw open the door and pressed the big .45 almost against Hudson's heart. "Hudson, if you come 'roun' this cabin ag'in I'll shoot you like a dog! I've fooled long 'nough with you! You tol' Annie you was the sheriff, you liar!" he burst out, hitting Hudson full in the stomach with the toe of his boot. Hudson dropped to the ground in a spasm of pain.

One night some time later Pierre was telling Annie not to worry about his safety, he would be very careful, for Hudson was a crafty scoundrel, when a low knock sounded upon the door. Pierre rose to open it.

Annie caught him by the arm, saying, "Be careful, Pierre, it might be a trick."

"Who's there?" he called.

"Hello, Pierre; open the door."

"It's Andy," said Pierre, as he opened the door. "What's up, Andy?"

"Come out here, an' I'll tell you," Andy replied.

"Promise me you won't go away before you come in and see me?" pleaded Annie.

He paused a moment, gazing at her with fond admiration and love. He recalled the first time he had met her, how she had gone out to him. Now, as he beheld her standing in the faint light of the moon, which had burst through a fleeting cloud, he almost trembled as he thought of what would become of her if Hudson killed him.

The door closed and he stood there in the night.

"Say, ol' man," said Andy after a short silence, "some cabins are better lookin' than others, ain't they, especially when you've be'n inside an' know the folks?"

"Did you see her a-standin' thar in the doorway?"

"Shore; I sorter envied you, too. Kinder wished I had a girl to fight fer."

"Do I have to fight fer her?"

"Crafty's a-waitin' fer you, lyin' behin' a clump o' brush. I struck his trail down by the river an' I be'n on 'is track all afternoon. I could've shot him, but I knowed you would've be'n disappointed. You kin sneak up behin' him an' I'll walk past the brush, wearin' yore clothes. We'll change outfits, so's he'll take me fer you. When I goes by the brush, Crafty'll be ready to shoot. You'll be behind him an' jus' afore he fires, Pierre, for the love of her, kill that sneakin' panther!"

"I'll crawl up to him an' when he goes to shoot, I'll ketch him in the very act! We'll beat that crafty fox at his own game. You beat him with a whiskey jug; I'll settle him with col' lead! Wait here a minute." Pierre entered the cabin, and took down the heavy rifle from the fireplace.

"Pierre," said Annie, "what's the matter?"

"Hudson's hidin' behind some brush, waitin' to shoot me as I go by. We're a-goin' to fool him. I mightn't see you ag'in tonight. If we git him, we'll hustle him into town. If he gits 'way from us, we'll never live in peace, 'cause he'll be a 'snake in the grass,' strikin' when we least expect it. Don't you worry," Pierre said, kissing her tenderly. "So long. Guess I'm ready, Andy," said Pierre, as they finished changing clothes. "I won't take this rifle; it'll be in my way when I'm crawlin' on my han's an' knees. You take it. I've got my 'guns' in thar holsters. I'm a-goin' to git right on top of Hudson, so's the powder will burn his shirt! Nothin' like bein' shore of yore game."

"We've got to be in this case," said Andy, examining the rifle.

With great care Pierre worked toward the brush. He lay behind some grass, thinking and resting, as he peeped over, trying to locate his enemy. Pierre crawled slowly, very careful in the moving of his position; the crackling of a stick, or the least noise would put Hudson on his guard and tell him that something was near.

Again the moon broke through the clouds. Pierre's breath came quick, and his right hand instinctively raised the big .45. Not sixty feet away there crouched a dark form close behind the brush. Pierre's first impulse was to kill Hudson as he lay, but upon a second thought he changed his mind, and waited to catch Crafty in the act of shooting Andy as he passed.

The sound of Andy whistling caused Hudson's pistol to flash in the moonlight, and his eyes were fastened on the figure walking toward him. Hudson gave a low and fierce chuckle that did not go out from his lips, but passed down into his throat.

Everything seemed deadly still. It was a time which tested nerves. These were men of nerve, and when the time came to act, they steadied their weapons coolly. The flash from Pierre's pistol was just a hair-breadth ahead of that of Hudson, and the latter sank down, his revolver going off into the air.

They left Hudson lying where he fell and went into town. The sheriff soon knew all about it.

The next morning the boys gathered about the Bartlett cabin, and the jury's verdict was "Pierre done the right thing."

About five years afterward, Pierre's wife and son suddenly and mysteriously disappeared. The frantic father headed a searching party, but no trace of the missing ones was found. Still the grief-stricken man despairingly persevered. Without touching food or closing his eyes for hours he madly kept up the pursuit, till, tortured and crushed with grief, worn out with the hardships of the trail, he broke completely down in body and in spirit.

The Bartletts watched and nursed him tenderly. His wife was their daughter, and so they experienced his awful anguish. They told him that for his little daughter's sake he must be a man.

Thereafter, Pierre, sorrow-burdened and despondent, wandered aimlessly over the plains. Life, which had been so bright before, was now dark and hopeless. Some days he was unusually brave, and other times it seemed that he could not endure it any longer. He could not be reconciled.

During one of the darkest of these hours he received the following note:

> "Peeair Maxwell—we are friends of Hudson you killed five year ago—we have revenged him by doing the same to yore son and wife—mebbe you'll know now how it feels."

Pierre's hands shook violently and his face turned ghastly green. He staggered to a chair and fell. When revived with whiskey he sprang up and rushed madly away. For a week his friends sought him, and finally found him senseless by a stream. They carried him home and patiently nursed him back to life. But, when his strength slowly returned, he could not be induced to stay.

On one of his wanderings he chanced upon a wagon train, and while chatting around the campfire he became acquainted with a little boy of about four years old. Then his sore heart poured out the pitiful story of his bereavement.

"His folks was killed by Injuns las' week," said one of the freighters, looking toward the little boy.

"An orphant!" Pierre sadly remarked.

"Shore. He ain't got no kin."

"No kin?" Pierre repeated. He knelt and gathered the fatherless child in his arms, and bathed the surprised face with tears. Then he arose and looked around on the agitated circle about the fire: "Friends, have you ever heard of the Maxwells of New Mexico? I'm Pierre Maxwell, an' I'll take this boy to be mine. He shall fill the vacancy left by my murdered son."

They one and all silently arose and shook Pierre's out-stretched hand, and the bargain was closed.

A few weeks later Pierre, with his little daughter, May Maxwell, and his adopted son, Ed, left Dodge City, Kansas, for Maxwell City, New Mexico.

PART II

"WHEN THE COWBOYS OWNED THE TOWNS"

CHAPTER III

THE LAND OF FEAR

IN Old Mexico there lived a well-to-do American cattleman who gave Jack and Clara everything to make them happy that money could buy. At first these pleasures wholly occupied their young minds, and they thought of nothing else. But as they grew older they began to observe that their mother rarely left her room, and then only in company with their father. And, too, they were only allowed to see her in his presence. They talked it over together, and then the boy became so bold as to ask his father the reason.

The man replied, "Yore mother isn't very well, an' kain't be bothered with children; she kain't stand it. If you worry her I'll have to take you far away, Jack." The boy stole back to his sister and whispered the warning.

In time the children were allowed to see their mother less and less, and they naturally believed that she was growing worse, especially when the doctor's calls increased. Then a trained nurse came, and the people went about the house in whispers. The children would tip-toe up to their mother's window outside, and there stand, hand in hand, and watch.

At last a day came when their father led them into the room. For a second they gazed at the awful change in their mother—then with a despairing, frightened cry they sprang toward her bedside and knelt, bursting into tears. Weak as she was, the mother endeavored to comfort them. But the children instinctively felt that something was about to happen. The father cautioned them, still their grief could not be quieted. The mother spoke of heaven and the beautiful things there. The children listened with wonderment; they had never heard it revealed that way before and their sobs ceased. The man sat in a chair with his chin resting on his closed hand as he stared vacantly at the Indian rug in front of him.

He was aroused by the entrance of the doctor, who, after a quick, searching glance at the sick woman, said that the children had better be taken out awhile.

"Don't take them away," the mother begged, "I won't be with them much longer."

"Annie! Annie! Don't talk that-a-way," the man cried, kneeling beside the bed. And the children grasped their mother's hands the tighter with the realization that something terrible was going to happen.

At first the doctor's efforts to separate them were vain, but at last his entreaties for the sick woman's condition succeeded, and he was left alone, except for the trained nurse.

But his patient grew weaker and weaker, and he called them in, saying to the husband in a low whisper that everything known to medical science had been done for her.

As the inevitable drew near, the grief-stricken family lingered at the bedside. The sick woman endeavored to cheer them, and with a prayer in their behalf she passed away.

"Annie! Annie!" cried the man, gazing on her impassive features.

A shrill cry brought him quickly to his feet and he stood an instant with head held high, like a deer scenting danger. Then he sprang from the bedside and disappeared through a door into an adjoining room, where he entered a secret passage. But none too soon to escape a force of police who burst into the death chamber with loud, angry threats. The doctor told them of the situation, but could give them no encouragement as to the hiding-place of the man they were seeking. In vain they searched for the secret opening. Thus the baffled party left with threats of vengeance.

Although these children had never seen their mother alone, nor hardly more than a few minutes a day, and consequently she was not as close to them as a mother should have been, she was their mother, and now, as they fearfully gazed on the silent figure on the bed, a realization came to them that she would never speak to them again. Then together they knelt at the bedside, grasped the cold, stiff hand, buried their faces in the cover and grieved. But no answer. Silently they raised their tear-stained faces and gazed again at her impassive face!

"Doctor," cried the girl, "why won't mamma speak to us?"

The kindly old man tried to draw them away with a smile, saying that she had gone to heaven and was awaiting her children there.

"Where's papa?" asked the boy. "Why did he run?"

The doctor endeavored to make some excuse.

"To arrest him?" the boy demanded, suspiciously. "He must have done something bad."

"Will papa ever come back?" the girl asked. "Is mamma waiting for him in heaven, too?"

The agitated doctor could not meet that innocent gaze and he turned away.

"Oh, I know!" the boy exclaimed. "He done something to break mamma's heart, and it killed her! I'll find him, doctor, and when I do, I'll kill him dead! I kin shoot straight, doctor. I kin hit a silver dollar at thirty feet every shot. Come on and I'll show you."

The doctor, glad to take their young minds from the death scene, quickly accepted the invitation.

For the next few days everything possible was done to occupy their thoughts.

After the simple funeral was over, the doctor left them in charge of the nurse and went his way.

A few days later she called them, as usual, to their breakfast, but this time she heard no reply. Upon entering their chambers she found the rooms empty. The house was searched in vain. The nurse quickly spread the news and soon searching parties hurried in all directions. At nightfall they returned without the little ones.

"Oh!" cried the nurse, "the poor little babes in the wood! What will become of them?"

Instinctively the children felt that they would be followed, and so at the first break of dawn they hid in an old, deserted adobe, remaining there all day. Again at night they set forth on the trail of the unknown. Hand in hand they stumbled on in the darkness, every little sound spurring them onward, in spite of the gnawing pain of empty stomachs.

Toward midnight they flung themselves on the side of the trail and slept from sheer exhaustion. But soon the chilly air from the plains caused them to rise, stiff and shaking, and they staggered on.

Often they sank down to rest, huddled in each other's arms for warmth, and their heads would nod again and again as they sat there, not daring to lie down. Then the cold would force them to totter on.

But they did not once think of turning back. They did not think of where they were going; they trudged painfully on and on. Behind them was the Land of Fear; before them, a good angel must have whispered, was the Land of Shelter and Hope.

When the encircling mountains began to loom up in the first faint light of the morning, the weary children sank once more beside the trail. For almost an hour they sat there, nodding their little heads and trembling with the cold and fatigue, as they struggled to keep awake.

Then they lost all sensibility.

Presently something was forced into their mouths and their benumbed senses awoke. Their eyes slowly opened and they gazed around as in a dream. They heard a kindly voice: "You'll be warm perty soon, dearie," and perceived that an elderly woman was bending over them with a flask in her hands.

"Where am us?" gasped the boy, endeavoring to sit up.

"Lay still, dearie," smiled the woman. "You mustn't move till you've e't an' your strength comes back. John," she called, "they're all right now; bring the broth."

When the hot drink had revived them and the warm blankets had shut out the cold, the boy told his story of how and why they had run away. He ended with the tearful plea: "An' you won't take us back?"

"No, no, dearie; we won't. Will we, John?"

"This is bad business, wife," he answered. "We might git into trouble with thar folks."

"Folks!" the wife interrupted. "Didn't he say he had no folks—but a robber father? What would make the child lie, if it ain't so? Do you s'pose they'd run away from a loving home? No, John; just use a little common sense. These are my children now; can't you see that God has answered my prayers at last?"

So the matter was settled.

The children were placed in the old "prairie schooner," comfortably wrapped in the warm blankets, and the bumping, joggling, rocking motion of the old camp wagon soon put the happy pair into a restful sleep, as the emigrant foster-parents drove on their way.

Stout hearts they were, to follow the trail made by the early pioneers, who crossed the plains in wagon trains, braving the danger of the attacks of the Indians and the hardship and the terrible suffering on the waterless desert, where the trail, as it reached out, was marked in many places by the graves of those who had died on the journey. Sometimes the wrecks of furniture or the remains of a charred wagon told of the awful tragedy enacted by the savage redman. The trail was strewn with the bleached bones of cattle which had died from drought and battle. And a little way from the trail occasionally one would run across the scattered bones of human skeletons, which had been dragged there and left unnoticed, unclaimed, without a grave!

The tired oxen were pushed onward at a slow pace till a valley was reached in Arizona where they raised cattle, and here the new movers settled.

"Wall, here we be, Maw," said the husband, jumping down. "Hand out Clara an' Jack an' then yore little self, an' we'll see how it feels to stand on our own land ag'in. Some day the children will be a great help to us."

"The Lord be praised!" answered the devout wife.

CHAPTER IV

A CHILD OF THE PLAINS

A DROUGHT came at last in earnest! Cattlemen coming in from "the hills" reported that "cows were dyin' like fleas." All the available pastures under irrigation in the valley were quickly taken at a high sum per head. Bands of skinny cattle were driven here and there in search of food. Food, the helpless creatures must have, and if they could not find it themselves, it must be procured for them.

In a few weeks all the pastures "under the ditches" were eaten off to the very roots. A few of the cattlemen had stacked hay on hand which had been reserved to the last. But this, too, gave out, and then the helpless stock was again turned out to shift for itself. Daily, death added skinny carcasses to the vast number lying in the valley.

Jack Morris returned home a little late one evening, very taciturn. He was coaxed to eat something. After he had finished his supper he drew his foster-father aside and told him that there was a rumor around that Cap'n Kidd was on the warpath again.

"We'll ketch him this time!" exclaimed the elder Morris.

"I hope so," Jack replied. "But he's a slippery snake. I think, Dad, seein' times are so dull an' money so scarce, I'll join the cavalry. I may be able to send a little money home, too. Anyway, I kin help against them troublesome Apaches."

"It's a job you'll git little thanks for, Jack. An' the risk is perty big; the Injuns, as you know, 'most always torture the captured to death. You won't git much glory nor reward."

"It will be enough reward to know that I have done my duty."

"You kain't make a very big display fightin' Injuns. They kin only be hunted down by everlastin' houndin', which gives little chance fer decent fightin', but at the same time requires the best of knowledge. Most folks don't savvy, an' they wonder why it takes so long to wear the red devils out."

"Well," said Jack, "you see, I'm old 'nough now, an' I want to do somethin' toward helpin' you earn a livin'. As the cattle business has gone all to smash, I kain't git a job 'roun' here—except I leave Arizona—so I thought if I joined the cavalry I would, at least, be near you an' could drop in occasionally."

"Yes? An' s'pose you were detailed to some other place?" Jack did not answer, and he kicked a clod with his high-heeled riding boot from which jingled a large Mexican spur.

"Don't you think you'd better stay home, Jack? There's no reason why you should leave us. This drought won't last forever an' we'll manage to stick it out somehow. You think it over. An' say, Clara went over to nurse Harvey's wife this afternoon an' if you're not too tired, I wish you'd go over an' fetch her home. I'm kinder fagged out or I'd go myself."

"There's no occasion. I'll call for her. An' say, don't say anything to ma of what I've said 'bout joinin' the cavalry."

"You jus' git that out of yore fool head, Jack," advised his foster-parent.

When Jack and his sister returned home a few hours later, she went into the house to make some coffee and get something to eat (because the long ride had produced a keen appetite) while he put up the horses. As Clara entered the room, there, on the floor, lay the bodies of her parents. Her cry quickly brought Jack to her side. He took in the situation at a glance. He stooped and read a piece of paper pinned on his foster-father's breast:

> "These poor devils wouldn't tell where they hid their money, so I was forced to teach them a lesson.
>
> "Yours truly,
>
> "Captain Kidd of Arizona."

Jack slowly arose and gazed upon his parents' faces, but not a muscle of his own moved; yet back of that set countenance there struggled human emotions harder to bear than feelings relieved by tears. Not so, his sister—her sorrow poured forth in a fit of weeping, which brought her brother out of a state in which the soul seemed momentarily to have passed out of the body, and he caught her in his strong arms just as she was about to fall into a faint. He carried her into her room, bathed her face with cold water, and gradually she became quieted.

The news of the murder spread quickly and soon there was a posse of determined cattlemen hurrying in search of Apache Kidd. One of the neighboring ranchers took Clara home to his wife, as Jack had joined the band.

After hours of an unsuccessful hunt, the weary men made ready to return home. But Jack told them that he would stick to the trail until he found Kidd, dead or alive! The leader tried to prevail upon him to go back with him, but Jack remained firm. As they were about to separate, he asked the leader to see to the burial.

"Jus' dig the grave near the ol' house; I think they'd like to rest thar. An', now, I wish to thank you, boys, fer yore help. I'll see you later —maybe it'll take weeks—maybe months—maybe years. So long, boys, so long!"

"So long, Jack; good luck!" they replied, as he turned his broncho's head and rode slowly away, his eyes fixed on the ground.

All that day he made the wiry little beast follow its steady, swinging lope. About sundown the rider drew rein at the Gila River, and removed the heavy saddle, then the bridle, sat down and ate some "hard tack" and jerked beef. After cooling off, the horse was in condition to drink, and he was led to the water. After his thirst was sufficiently satisfied, he was hobbled and turned loose to graze. Then Jack wrapped himself in his blanket, laid his head on his saddle and fell asleep.

At the first trace of morning in the east, he was astir. Again he ate the "hard tack," jerked beef and drank at the river. After which he caught his broncho, saddled and bridled it, and once more the monotonous gait was struck. At noon, as the scorching sun was straight over head, he entered a little town called Bailey's Wells, in San Simon Plains, and stopped for refreshment.

As the broncho showed signs of the hard journey, his rider allowed him several days' rest. But Jack was not idle; he endeavored to get news of Captain Kidd's whereabouts. Rumor had him in San Simon Valley and thither Jack relentlessly bent his trail.

There he was disappointed and so rode through the Perilla Mountains down into Sulphur Spring Valley. Again he was foiled. But here he chanced to find a little work at Tombstone and so earned some money which he needed. Then he passed on to Cachise, near Alkali Flat—then into the Aravaipa Valley. So he wandered for many days, doggedly hanging to the long trial.

At last, after a fruitless search, he returned home. He found that a neighboring rancher had been very good to Clara.

The brother and sister went back to the old home and endeavored to live as before; but home was not as it used to be: the absence of the missing ones was cruelly felt. Also money was getting scarcer every day, so Clara decided to go to San Francisco to work. With a long embrace and a loving kiss she parted from her brother. He watched the train disappear, then he turned with a sigh and walked to his horse. For a time he gave the little beast its head, riding in deep thought. The broncho naturally loped toward home.

"No, Calico, not thar," said he, reining up with a start, which caused the well-trained horse to fall back on its haunches, its head tossed high. "Not thar," he repeated. "It ain't the same. We've got to hit the trail. From now on, Cal, we won't have any home but the hills or the plains. An' we'll always be on Cap'n Kidd's trail—fer he's the cause of all this! We'll follow him night an' day till he's ours, Cal! Come, let's be off; my soul thirsts fer him! No rest fer us till we bring Apache Kidd to justice! Till then we'll camp on the plains!"

CHAPTER V

THE MEETING WITH CAP'N KIDD

CAPTAIN KIDD soon learned that a young fellow was hounding his tracks and Jack was watched carefully. One night the spies reported the place of his camp and the Captain dropped over to pay him a call.

Jack awoke with a start, and he heard a sharp command: "Han's up, sonny!" He looked into the muzzles of a brace of Colt's and obeyed.

The Captain drew Jack's belt and holster—which lay on the ground by his head—away with the toe of his boot, and said: "I'm Apache Kidd, sonny, an' I jus' dropped over to ask you why you're breakin' yore neck to find me."

"Look into the inside of my hat an' you'll find a little piece of paper which will tell you."

Captain Kidd found the blood-stained note he had himself pinned on old man Morris's breast with those awful words of mockery. "So," said he, crumpling it in his left hand, "you're here to revenge him, I reckon."

Jack made no reply.

Just then the full moon disappeared behind a fleeting cloud and Jack's hand dropped on the ground beside his head. Captain Kidd knew the meaning of the sound and he laughed.

"I've got yore gun, child; don't be angry. Let us lovers enjoy the poetical darkness for awhile. The moon will soon be out—so let's become better acquainted. I know you're jus' natcherally itchin' to spring at my throat; but, child, it wouldn't help you any, because my men, hidin' all 'roun' us, would resent yore unkind treatment. Besides, wouldn't that be a nice way to receive a visitor who has jus' dropped in to pay you a call? So let's be sociable, dear! Now, did you dance the las' dance, an' who did you escort home? An' say, wasn't Sam Jones's gal a stunner?"

The veins in Jack's neck almost burst under the tantalizing remarks and he could contain himself no longer, being at the point of springing up and burying his hand in his tantalizer's throat. He would have lost self-control if at that moment the moon had not reappeared and in its bright light they eyed each other: the one with the tormenting look of an Indian, the other with all the hate and rage of a cornered lion.

The tormentor grinned mockingly. "You're not very entertainin', child. Come, tell me why you're seekin' me—were them yore folks?"

Jack remained silent.

"Answer me!" Apache Kidd commanded fiercely. He leaned closer to Jack, his voice sinking almost to a whisper and his eyes glaring wildly: "I'll have my men build a fire an' you'll sit on it till you're thawed out; you're too icy, child!"

Jack knew that his captor was merciless and that he inflicted the most terrible tortures; yet he scornfully returned his gaze.

After a short, fearful silence, a triumphant smile crossed Apache Kidd's face, as he stepped back. "I know—I know! They weren't yore folks—because *I'm yore father!*"

It was Jack's turn now to sneer, and he said disdainfully, "You?"

"You were a youngster when I left you—but I recognize you now!"

"Then, father," said Jack, mockingly, "please take yore 'gun' down; you may git too enthusiastic over this happy reunion an' hurt yore dear son!"

The other paid no heed but asked: "Whar's yore sister? Is she livin'?"

"Yes, Apache Kidd, she is! You took my folks from me —but my sister is safe."

"I tell you they were not yore folks."

"The same thing: they raised us."

After a pause Cap'n Kidd muttered: "You must be the one. But you're so changed I hardly kin make you out—except thar's somethin' about yore eyes that makes me think of yore mother—when you looked at me a certain way. Isn't it strange I should remember after all these years? Maybe you kin think back an' see her on her dyin' bed: a little boy an' a little gal an' a man. Then the man jumped up an' ran away. Soon the police entered the house—but they couldn't find him—he was gone." Strange emotions worked in Jack's breast as the other continued: "Then the old home went to pieces. The little boy an' the little gal went out into the cold world an' found shelter. Boy! boy! God fergive me, I'm sorry fer what I've done; they were kind to you an' yore sister—she was the image of yore mother, an' how I worshiped her! An' yore sister, too! Many's the time she's sat on this knee, an' you, too. But she was my favorite. An' you were a good little boy; not a bit jealous. Why couldn't them times just a-kept on an' on!"

"Because you were an outlaw!" Jack exclaimed. "An' it was you who brought me to this!"

"I couldn't help it. Mebbe some day you'll find out how it all happened. But now that you know I'm yore father, will you still follow my trail?"

"I kain't seem to fergit *them.*"

"Why didn't they hand the money over peacefully?"

"Because they didn't know you!" Jack burst out.

The outlaw chuckled savagely. Then he said: "I reckon *you* do. Jus' a few minutes ago yore life wasn't worth a cent: I intended to kill you on the spot an' learn the rest a lesson; but a father, you know, hasn't quite the heart. If I let you go will you promise me to never hit my trail ag'in?"

"Under the circumstances, I cannot do otherwise."

"Then walk straight away from me as quick as you kin. I'll jus' keep this little 'gun' of your'n to keep temptation out of yore hands. Go, boy, an' don't look back!"

Jack silently obeyed and as he hurried away he expected to feel the hot sting of a bullet in his back.

But the outlaw did not fire. He stood there in the bright moonlight watching the form disappear behind the brush.

"You're young, boy," he soliloquized, "very young—only a child. Maybe some time you'll hunt down yore pore ole father an' give him up—fer you are clever, like me: you've got the pride of craft! They say, too, you're quite a pistol shot. Oh, you'll make a man yet; you've got the stuff in you! But it's a good thing that when I looked into yore eyes I saw thar a look I've sometimes seen in yore mother's!"

The faithful band collected around the chief.

"Say, Cap'n," said Big Collins, "barrin' family relations, didn't you do a fool thing to let him go?"

The leader [illegible]ently wheeled on his heel, and his men followed him to their horses. One of the band led a little cow-pony with an empty saddle.

Jack lay on his stomach behind some brush, listening for the slightest noise. Any moment he expected to hear the approach of footsteps, and next, to see a form loom up in the bright moonlight. "Oh, for my 'gun'!" he sighed.

After a while, as he heard no alarm, he fell to thinking. And his head sank on his crossed forearms. He buried his face in them and bitter tears of disappointment wet his shirt sleeves.

"Why didn't I be careful?" he sobbed. "Why did I let him surprise me?—but I didn't even suspect I was any place near him! Oh! I kain't savvy it all! It's jus' my luck! No! I'm a fool! Only a child! Yes, a child! He said so! An' he made sport of me—he tantalized me. An' I said I'd never follow him. What kin he expect? What does he take me fer? If I don't follow him—maybe some time we'll happen to meet" (Jack raised his head and glanced fiercely around), "an' if we do—if we do—father or no father, he'll be jus' the same to me!"

Jack cautiously arose and "hit" the back trail.

Not far from his left the terrible wail of a coyote pierced the still night air. Jack helplessly clinched his fists and ground his teeth as he staggered on, his high-heeled riding boots making walking very difficult.

Toward nightfall he "struck" a ranch and told his story. After the empty pain in his stomach was somewhat satisfied, he mounted a broncho and led a heavily-armed band of cowmen in pursuit. At the bend in the trail Jack suddenly jerked up his broncho and at the same instant his big six-shooter came out, quickly followed by the entire watchful band. They saw a broncho tied to a cactus forty feet high.

"Thar's my bronc!" Jack exclaimed, slipping from his saddle.

The others did, too, putting the horses in a circle for protection in the manner of breastworks, over which peeped deadly firearms and sharp eyes glancing in all directions.

"I kain't see nothin'," one remarked, presently. "They are keepin' low—it's an ambush all right."

After a long silence, Jack said: "We kain't stay here like this ferever. Let's walk along toward my bronc, keepin' on the inside of ours so's we'll be protected." The band moved cautiously as Jack suggested, and came up slowly to the horse. "My guns are hangin' on the saddle-horn!" Jack exclaimed.

They encircled the horse, keeping behind theirs as before, and Jack reached for his weapons. He discovered a piece of paper sticking in the holster. He snatched it out, unfolded it, and read:

"Dear Son:—I knew that you would surely hit my trail as soon as you could get help, so I left your property here so you might find it. I was very sorry to be compelled to take it from you at the time. Allow me to give you a little fatherly advice: don't chase us too far because we've had a very good start and are also well re-enforced; so don't weary yourself. Better go back, child, and forget your poor old dad. He does not always treat such naughty, troublesome boys as leniently as you and perhaps next time he'll be compelled to punish you. As it was, it was a good thing for you that in your eyes, as you looked at me so scornfully, I saw something of your mother's look. That look saved you. So long, child!

"Your very affectionate father,
"CAPTAIN KIDD."

"He's a good one!" said one of the band.

"Isn't it sympathetic?" grinned another.

Jack gazed fiercely at the message.

"He's makin' a fool of you," said a third.

With a savage curse Jack crushed the note in his hand. "If he thinks I'm only a kid, I'll show him!"

He thrust his toe in the stirrup and was about to mount. "Don't show yourself," said one, holding him back. “Wait till we find out if any of ’em are ’roun’.” The speaker placed his coat on the stock of his Winchester, put his sombrero on top and raised it slowly above his horse’s back. A second later he pulled it down and waited. Then he repeated the trick several times.

“Boys,” said Jack, “you’d better return home; this will be a long trail.” He took off the borrowed belt and six-shooter and returned them to their owner. “Yes,” he continued, buckling on his own, “this will be a long, long trail;—but I’ll stick to it!”

“Better come back an’ git some rest first,” invited the one who had just received his Colt’s.

“I kain’t,” Jack replied; “the trail’s gittin’ too cold now.”

“What kin you do alone?” asked one. “Mebbe he’s jus’ drawin’ you, anyway. Fer that matter, mebbe we’re all surrounded right now by the hull Apache Injun tribe.”

Jack hesitated.

Then he said: “Next time I won’t be caught sleepin’. So long, boys!” he added, riding away.

They knew that it would be of no avail to try to change his purpose. It was a very foolish idea for a single man to try to trail a band of desperadoes, but Jack was so intent on seeking Apache Kidd that he was beyond reason. So they silently allowed him to go.

"So long!" they called. "Good luck!"

"He shore is a kid," one remarked. "What kin he do alone, anyway? Mebbe he'll learn some day."

The band watched him a long time to be certain he was not followed, then went back.

For an hour Jack kept to the trail. Then, as it was nearing sunset, he guided the broncho aside to make camp for the night. He removed the heavy saddle, then the bridle, and turned the broncho loose to get what scanty food it might find. They had no water that night. Jack surmised that Captain Kidd knew where to find it, and that the trail would lead him to some the next day. So he heroically swallowed his jerked beef. As night came on, he rolled himself in his blanket, his elbow on the ground, his face in his hand. His ears were patiently waiting to catch the slightest sound. In front of him lay two big Colt's.

Not once, as the night slipped by, did he allow his eyes to close; not for a second was he off his guard. Like the Indian, his very nostrils were even ready to scent the least danger. Not more than an instant did his gaze rest on one spot.

At the first break of day he was up. Again he manfully ate his jerked beef. Then he caught and saddled his broncho to take up the trail once more.

At first they moved very cautiously; then into the natural, swinging lope. The miles went by from eight to ten to the hour. About two hours before sundown "Calico" acted queerly and Jack instinctively felt that they were approaching something, and again he reined him from the trail. "We don't follow it this side, Cal," said Jack; "if Captain Kidd's waitin' fer us, it's thar." And this gauntleted hand pointed in the direction of the trail. "We'll hit the river; but not near the trail. After dark I'll locate thar camp. We've got to move careful, shore, but move we must, 'cause we're jus' dyin' for a drink."

Presently they came upon a little stream running in a dried-up river bed. They hurried to the water and drank sparingly, and then rested. Again Jack ate his beef, while his horse, saddled and ready, gnawed the bark from a tree. No one disturbed them. At sundown Jack led his horse down for another drink and also took one himself.

When the sunset began to fade on the encircling mountains, and dusk settled in the valley, Jack tied his horse near the river bank and made ready to find the trail on foot. Soon the chilly night air fell and with it the darkness. Jack took off his big Mexican spurs, drew a six-shooter in each hand, and crept circumspectly in the river bed, following the stream toward the place where Captain Kidd must have crossed or stopped.

The night was very dark. Sometimes, careful as he endeavored to be, Jack's boot would kick a loose stone, and, as the sound seemed much greater in the still night air, his hands would grip the pistol-handles tightly. After an hour of the most patient and trying movements, Jack's wary ears caught the sound of a pack of coyotes gathering at a place where food was near at hand but just out of reach, and his heart beat fast at the thought which flashed into his active brain. Not far ahead was a camp! Whose? Was it Apache Kidd's? Jack's breath came quicker and he went forward to ascertain; his body was bent almost on his knees and in this crouching position he crawled slowly on; the revolvers cocked and ready. After advancing a few hundred yards, he saw a small fire burning near the river bank, and his movements became more guarded than ever. He stopped often to listen and reconnoitre, and then he would worm forward.

Within seventy yards of the camp he suddenly halted: he had discovered two forms, near the fire, rolled in their blankets and sombreros covering their faces. "Where's the rest of 'em?" thought Jack. "Wonder if I've crawled into a trap?" He scooped a hole in the sand sufficient to hide his body and waited, never taking his eyes from the camp.

At last morning broke; but the sleepers did not move. Jack sighed. They were apparently not in a hurry. "Wish I could have a doze, too," he thought. "Wonder if they're not hungry?"

An hour passed. Another and still another; but neither Jack nor the forms at the fire stirred. As the wind blew in his direction, the lad believed he ought to smell the smoke of the fire. He peeped over the edge of the hole. "If some of 'em ain't watchin' me from a tree," he said to himself, "I'm all right here. They're still snoozin'!"

The sun's rays found him and warmed his chilled body. "It's past noon," he thought. "I'm gittin' most starved. They must think I've got the patience of an Injun!"

The sun grew hotter and hotter; the sand threw back the heat into Jack's heavy eyes. It was hard to keep them open. Soon his head began to nod. With an effort he would rouse himself. But he finally lost control and fell asleep.

It was dark when he awoke. At first he could not grasp the situation—then it all came back to him. He glanced toward the camp: it was dark and quiet. As he sprang noiselessly up he cursed himself for falling asleep and allowing his captives to slip away. A six-shooter in each hand, he crawled toward the camp. Nothing stirred; nothing moved. But almost before he knew it, he came upon two dark forms lying on the ground. His weapons clicked!

"Hands up!" he commanded.

There was no response.

"Hands up!" he growled fiercely. He waited a second—then fired. To him the shot sounded like a cannon on the still night air! Then all grew silent again. With a terrible oath, Jack sprang up and emptied a six-shooter at the forms.

"If you're not dead now, come an' git me, because you ain't human!" he said. He stooped and jerked a blanket from a form—he gazed stupidly through the darkness. At his feet he felt a small pile of brush. He sent it flying in all directions with a vicious kick from his boot, and jumped upon the other. It was the same!

" My respects to you, father!" he murmured, sinking despairingly on the ground.

After a while he gathered up the blankets and walked in the river bed toward the place where he had left "Calico" tied. He soon reached the spot, as it did not take the time to return that it did to find the outlaw's camp. He found his horse undisturbed and he was greeted with a welcoming neigh. The beast had eaten everything within reach and was asking for more. Jack took off the heavy saddle and bridle, led the beast down to drink, and tied it to a fresh tree; then he ate some jerked beef. For about an hour he sat thinking.

"It's no use," he muttered. He rolled himself in his blankets, pillowed his head on his saddle and slept.

After a hurried meal in the morning, he rode across the river to find out if the trail continued, or if it ended at the river. He ascertained that it did not cross, so he knew that it was in the river. But which way? Water leaves no trail.

"Well, there's one thing," said Jack, "I've seen Apache Kidd face to face an' I know what kind of a foxy devil I've got to deal with!"

His eye caught a piece of paper attached to a broken branch stuck in the sand and he rode to the spot. At first he was about to ignore the note, but he might get a clew from it, so he stooped from the saddle and took it.

> "Dear Child:—I knew you would follow me, so I left two men in camp to keep you from getting lonesome. They're both deaf, but you'll get acquainted with them all right. Just be patient. I had to leave in a hurry, so you may find it hard to find my trail. But as a mere suggestion, I would cut myself in two if I were you, so one-half could go up the river and the other half go down. That way will save you time. Or, you go one way and your horse the other. But I'll bet the horse will find me before you do.
>
> "Yours in haste,
> "FATHER."

"He'll pay for this some day!" Jack burst out.

CHAPTER VI

THE PRIDE OF CRAFT

ONE night there entered a saloon an old man; he took several drinks at the bar, then he invited the barkeeper to have one.

"Say, do you know I'm wise?" boasted the old man, presently.

"You bet you are," the barkeeper purred.

"You bet I am! I bought the old Morris ranch an' live thar. Lately I've been missin' my wood. It wouldn't do fer an ol' man like me to set up night after night an' lose so much sleep watchin' fer the thief, so I bored a big hole in a piece of fat cottonwood an' filled it with powder—when the galoot puts it in his stove, it'll blow him all to smithereens! Ha! ha! ha! I'll fix him!"

The barkeep gave him a significant wink. "You're certainly a foxy duck!"

"Ain't I?" exclaimed the old man. He turned and called to the others lounging about the room. "Come on, boys; the drinks are on me!"

They immediately responded and drank to his health. After which he related to them his "foxy trick." "And so," he added, "if you should happen to hear of anybody being scared to death by an explosion 'roun' here, jus' let me know, an' I'll reward you. I've got lots of money hidden in my ol' shack—lots of it! I don't keer 'bout losin' a little wood, boys, but I do hate to be robbed. Yes, sir, money's no object to me—I've got bushels of it!"

"I reckon you're new in these parts, stranger," said one, drawing him aside.

"Jus' been here two weeks," the old man replied.

"Well, this is a hard country, an' I'd be perty careful about publishin' that you've got money hidden in yore house. Ol' man Morris was murdered thar for his. Besides, I kinder think that Cap'n Kidd's hoverin' 'roun' here now. He killed ol' Morris."

"Say, who are you?"

"I'm sheriff."

"Well, sheriff, if you git the feller who stole my wood, I'll pay you handsomely. I've got the rocks!"

"Sh! Not so loud. Don't you see the boys are all watching you? You'd better go home an' dispose of yore money; it ain't safe to keep it in the house."

"Oh, I ain't afeared, sheriff. I'm a foxy ol' duck, you know!"

"But you don't know Cap'n Kidd. He's fooled us all fer years. He's as foxy as they make 'em."

"Don't you worry, sheriff. I'll bore a hole in him, too, an' fill him with powder!" the old man chuckled. "Yes, sir! Cap'n Kidd ain't no match fer me! I kin take care of myself. Come on, boys, have another on me! I'm overburdened with money! Here's the spondoolicks!" taking out a large handful of golden five, ten and twenty dollar pieces, and scattering them on the bar. "Keep the change, ol' man, I'm flush! Money's a burden to me!"

The others eyed the coins hungrily. Then they again drank to his health.

"Well, so long, boys!" he said. "Don't fergit about the reward fer that wood thief. I've got a bank right in my house, an' I'll pay you beautifully. The money's waitin' fer the lucky one. You jus' listen fer an explosion. You know I bought the ranch of ol' man Morris of a young feller who seemed to be crazy to hunt down this here Apache Kidd an' he sold the ranch cheap because he needed the money to keep him goin' on the trail. I certainly got a good bargain. I reckon the young fool will come back some day an' say that I cheated him. Ha! ha! ha! A feller don't git a bargain like that every day. I jus' struck it lucky. An' I had to pay cash down on the spot—*but I've got the cash, boys, I've got the cash!*"

The door closed behind him, and the men at the bar grinned at each other. Quickly the story circulated of the old man's wealth.

Two weeks later Jack entered town, and inquired about the old man.

"Whiskey always makes a fool out of a feller!" exclaimed the sheriff to him. "That ol' chump will shore git into trouble. But I warned him —the fool!"

"Mebbe he's got more whiskey than money," laughed Jack.

"He's got money, all right. Perty near every night he's in town spendin' it like a lord. I believe he's an ol' prospector who struck it lucky an' don't know the value of money. But I'm afraid somebody else will show him how to keep it. It was the death of pore ol' Morris an' his wife. I feel shakey 'bout this ol' fool. He don't use common sense! The idea of publishin' such temptation in a place like this! Yore ol' dad was close-mouthed, but even he got found out somehow. This ol' feller must be gittin' childish; someone ought to take him in an' protect him."

"Why don't you? An' git him to will you all his money?" confidentially suggested Jack.

"I'll speak to my ol' woman 'bout it, an' see what she has to say!"

"Oh, she'll agree all right; women are always ready fer a good thing like that. But mebbe you'll find it a perty hard thing to convince the ol' chap. When you go I'd like to go with you, an' git a look at the ol' ranch ag'in. Besides, I know the old man better than you do, anyway."

"Shore. I'll be much obliged to you if you'll help me out. By the way, have you seen or heard anythin' new of Apache Kidd?"

"Nothin' new. I jus' come in from Squaw Peak. Been scoutin' 'roun' thar; but I didn't git no encouragement."

"That Apache Kidd does beat the Dutch!"

"An' every other nationality, too! Here we think he's hidin' somewhars in the valley an' tomorrow we're liable to hear of him in Texas or New Mexico."

"Or robbin' that pore ol' fool on yore dad's ranch."

"We'll go an' speak to him to-morrow."

They rode out to the ranch and found that the old man was not at home.

"How disappointin'!" cried the sheriff. "I'll call ag'in to-morrow."

They returned to town, where Jack remained several days. Nothing was seen of the old man during that time. Jack left town the fourth night. On the next day the old man came into town and "blowed" more money than ever. The deputy sheriff took him to task, whereupon the spendthrift asked if this wasn't a free country.

"Kain't an ol' millionaire spend a few cents?" he demanded.

The crowd opened wide its eyes. Truly, he must have "barrels" of gold! But where did he keep them?

The sheriff became extremely worried. He heard the old man's reputation increasing every day, and felt afraid that the gold would be too much of a temptation for such a reckless community. And he was right.

One night the old man sat at his kitchen table counting some gold. Occasionally he would throw a piece down to ascertain if it was sound, and not plugged. His enjoyment was cut short.

"Hands up, grandpaw!" said a fierce voice behind him.

He turned and looked into the muzzle of a big six-shooter over whose sights peered savage eyes.

"Who are you?" the old man timidly demanded.

"Don't you know, grandpaw? I'm Apache Kidd, at yore service. Give me the eagles an' tell whar the rest's hid."

"I ain't got no more."

"You lie! Quick, tell me!"

The old man hesitated.

"Shall I call my gang an' have 'em put you on a red-hot stove?"

"No! no!" screamed the old man. "I'll tell you whar it is! It's down thar."

"How do you git down?"

"Here's a trap door under the cupboard."

"Wal, you go down and fetch up the stuff jus' as fast as you kin move. An' be shore that you fetch it all up, too, or you'll taste the sweets of Apache Kidd in short order. Now, git a rustle on you! We don't want to quarrel with the sheriff nor anyone else."

"Oh, don't take my money, sir," the old man begged. "I'm ole an' feeble an' it's all I have! Don't leave me destitute in my old years!"

"If thar's enough fer me down thar, I'll leave you some to squeeze through on. Come, get busy!"

The outlaw followed the old man with catlike steps to the cupboard. It was quickly pushed aside and the trap-door opened; the old man was about to go down when Apache Kidd detained him by the arm. "I reckon I'd better have some of the boys do that." He made a low signal and four entered immediately. "Seen anythin' outside?" the chief asked.

"Nothin'," one replied.

Apache Kidd peered down searchingly through the trap; then he told the men what to do. They disappeared through the opening and he kept the old man covered. But the old man appeared to be not the least hostile; he was bowed in grief.

Soon one came up from below with a bag of gold and the old man uttered a loud cry.

"Shut up, you fool!" Apache Kidd commanded, watching him warily. Then he called through the trap, "Hurry up, you fellers down thar! What's that?" he exclaimed, springing back. "That noise down thar: I heard a groan! What's the trouble down thar?" he asked, cautiously bending over the opening.

"I bumped my head," came up the answer.

"Well, hurry up! What takes you so long?"

"We've got it all," said a voice, approaching the trap-door. Then a head appeared. "Here it is, Cap'n! It's heavy! Must be enough here to buy the hull United States!"

Apache Kidd's eyes sparkled as he gazed upon the well-filled canvas bags.

"Enjoy it while you kin, Father!" said Jack Morris, suddenly returning to his natural voice and snatching off his disguise. "But it has enticed you into a trap!"

The outlaw started and stared at the speaker before him. Then he exclaimed: "So, it's you!" And his revolver almost touched Jack's heart.

"Don't move!" Jack ordered sharply. "You're cornered. Look behind you."

From the cellar below came up muffled yells and moans.

Apache Kidd turned and saw what a trap he had blundered into. Scarlet with rage, he was about to face Jack, when he felt a grip of steel close around the hand which held the six-shooter.

The outlaw strained to free the hand and the weapon went off into the air. Six of Jack's men rushed into the room and quickly the outlaws were bound hand and foot and lay helpless on the floor.

Jack heard the cracking of firearms, the galloping of horses, and he ordered his men to join the pursuit.

As his men hurried out, breathing hard with the excitement of the coming chase, Jack closed the trap-door and pulled the cupboard over it. When he was alone he walked to Apache Kidd's side. "Wasn't it a great idea, father?" he taunted. "I gave you my word that I wouldn't hit yore trail—I broke that word, but I couldn't help it. You fooled me perty slick, though, an' so I thought I'd make you come to me. I found a big sum of gold hidden here by old man Morris—for which you murdered him—an' that same gold baited you here! I did very well what I had planned to do: have the news spread of a rich ol' fool livin' here, an' you heard of it an' bit!"

"You are the *pride of craft,* boy!" Apache Kidd exclaimed. "A few years has changed you a lot. I was a fool to let you go that time. I realized somethin' of this—but I couldn't find a heart to kill you, bad as I was."

"I'm a-goin' to pay you back. As you gave me a chance fer my life, I'll give you a chance fer yores."

"Will you, boy? Jus' put me on a bronc without a saddle or a bridle—I don't even ask fer a 'gun'—tie my arms behind my back an' give me a hundred yards start an' I'll bless you! Jus' give me a chance!"

Jack turned away with disgust. Then he faced the outlaw—"Not that kind. You'll have to take yore chance with the law."

"With the law! You'll never git me to town, boy; they'll lynch me first."

"You're right; we've got to hurry. They're chasin' yore band now, but they'll soon be back." Jack stooped, cut the rope which bound the captain's legs and helped him to his feet. He did likewise to the other prisoners.

"Now, walk ahead," Jack ordered. "If you try to play any games, yore life will be the forfeit. We'll pay the sheriff a visit. Keep away from any trail as much as possible, as we don't care to meet anybody this night. But don't fergit thar's a pair o' 'guns' at yore back all the time, an' a feller who knows how to use 'em."

At first they moved cautiously away from the house for fear of being discovered, which would have meant certain death. But as Jack heard no cause for alarm he pushed his prisoners forward at a fast gait. Finally they arrived in town, and Jack proudly announced to the astonished sheriff: "Here's Cap'n Kidd. Git him in jail as fast as you kin an' guard him carefully. You're liable to hear from the boys soon." The prisoners were lodged safely. "I reckon that'll keep 'em fer a time," said Jack. "You watch 'em now, an' I'll be back soon."

Jack hurried back to the ranch, where he found two men who had returned from the pursuit. One was bandaging a bullet wound, while the other stood guard at the door. He admitted Jack after receiving the signal.

"Whar's the others?" Jack asked.

"Haven't showed up yet. We haven't heard any more shots fer quite a spell, an' I reckon the boys will soon be in. Whar's Apache Kidd? You know? He wasn't here when we entered."

"I took him to the sheriff," Jack replied.

"You did!" the wounded one exclaimed. "Why didn't you lynch him?"

"Because he onct gave me a chance fer my life an' now I've paid him back."

"The fellers will be rippin' mad; thar mouths are jus' waterin' to lynch him! You'll be jumped on perty hard, Jack."

"I'd like to know who landed the fish."

"Jus' the same, you'll be raked over the coals."

"Well, I don't care to be mixed up in this mess any more an' I'll jus' light out. It'll be perty hard to convince some of the boys jus' why I gave my father a chance. So you tell 'em to divide the gold. I appreciate yore services very much, an' I shall always think of you in his deal. So long, boys!"

He went out, mounted his horse and loped away, followed by the indignation of his men! But it was readily lost in oblivion, as his reputation quickly spread for miles and miles around.

CHAPTER VII

JIM BUYS ANOTHER GUN

THE proprietor of the hardware store at Skull Valley, Arizona, was sitting at his desk, looking over an old ledger, when Jim entered.

Jim was tall, slim and light of frame, but very wiry from hard work upon the range, which left not an ounce of surplus flesh. His action was easy and quick; graceful in his own dignified way. Low down on his right hip there rested a big single-action revolver, with its holster tied to the "chaps," so that the "gun" would come out smoothly when Jim needed it in a hurry.

"Howdy, Talby?" said he. "How're you feelin'?"

"Same as usual," replied the proprietor, rubbing his eyes. "A feller with a dead liver ain't no account nohow; he can't never see nothin' in life. An ol' mossback like me ought to quit work anyhow. But what's a feller to do? Can't sit 'round' an' do nothin'."

"You ought to git out an' take some exercise," suggested Jim.

"Don't do no good to git out an' walk if you ain't got no place to walk to—I mean if you walk jus' fer walk's sake, I can't see no great benefit. Now, ef you walk with some end in view—say, to collect a bill, I always feel as though I've got somethin' to walk fer. Hain't thet right?"

"Shore. Say, Talby, I've got a bronc across the street I'll bet kin wake up yore dead liver! Come over an' try him."

"Too busy, Jim; too busy jus' now."

"All right, Talby, some other time. Say, how're 'guns' sellin'? Cheap?"

"Wall, iron's got up a little; but I'll sell you a good 'gun' perty reason'ble."

"Let me see that one," said Jim, pointing to a .45-calibre six-shooter in the showcase.

"She's a beaut!" said Talbert, handing over the revolver. "Guaranteed to kill an elephant, an' she'll tear a hole big 'nough to bury a mule in! You see that 'gun'?" he asked, pointing to another one in the case. "That ol' blunderbuss kicks worse than an ol' woman. This one in yore han' shoots as easy as a cap-pistol, but when she hits, she hits as hard as a sledge-hammer! Why, Jim, she'll sink a warship without half tryin'!"

"Thought you had a dead liver," Jim smiled.

"Yes, but I'm only exercisin' a little. If you want a good 'gun,' there it is."

"I want one that will shore go off."

"When you set this a-goin', the air will be full of lead! Look at thet barrel, Jim—eight inches of the fines' steel you ever seen. An' thet sight, by gosh! when you squints over thet, somethin's got to fall."

"How much is she?"

"Twenty dollars."

"I'll take her. Guess I'll have you take out the trigger, Talby; when I puts in my six shots I don't want no trigger to bother me."

"I wouldn't remove the trigger, but jus' tie it back; then you kin have it when you want it for ordinary shootin'. Here's a belt thet will hol' yore bullets like a mother hol's her babe. Want some cartridges to fill it?"

"Shore; give me a box. Never min' wrappin' 'em up. I'm goin' to wear the belt—stick in the pills."

"Is thet all you want?"

Jim scratched his head, then replied: "Let me see a hat." Talbert scrambled for the hats.

"Here's a beaut," he said, holding up a broad-brimmed one. "Lates' style, fine material, an' it'll fit you like an eggshell. Thar's a lookin'-glass over thar; go an' see yoreself."

Jim tried on the hat before the glass, turning this way and that way, surveying himself from different positions.

"How much?" he asked.

"Ten dollars. She's a genuine Stetson!"

"Looks fine," said Jim. "I'll take it."

"Better git a pair o' gauntlets to match the hat. Thar's a pair for five dollars. Genuine buckskin. They're all right."

"All right; I'll wear 'em! A feller kain't look too good at his funeral!"

"Anythin' else? How are you fixed in shirts?"

"Say, Talby, I've come in here to buy a 'gun,' an' now, look at me—they'll think I'm doin' my Christmas shoppin'."

A chorus of whoops and yells and scattering shots, closely followed by shots fired in quick succession, was heard. Down the dusty street swiftly rode a band of cowboys. Heated with liquor, firing and screaming and urging on their maddened ponies with shouts, spurs and quirts, they swept by the store.

"Hain't no use to monkey with the devil when he's got whiskey in him," said Talbert; "whiskey ain't no respecter o' persons."

"That shore's a crazy bunch," Jim declared.

"Jim," said Talbert, "the feller who is responsible fer such goin's-on wants to merry my darter. The ol' woman an' me have scolded Kate an' begged an' even threatened her, but she sticks by thet saloon-keeper! I've driven him from my house, but she meets him."

"I know, Talby, she won't look at us common fellers; we haven't any show. Last night he saw me talkin' to Kate an' he said he'd fix me. That's why I'm buyin' this extra 'gun'."

"The idea," said Talbert, "that Kate should want to merry sech a feller. She's had fine chances, but she almost insults any other chap who comes to see her. Jim, I'm gittin' ol' an' want to retire; us ol' mossbacks can't keep a-goin' forever. I thought if Kate would merry some decent feller I'd take him right in with me and learn him the business; then I'd step out an' let him run it. There's a fine chance fer a worthy feller. I can't understand why she wants a saloon-keeper. I'm afraid of him. He treats her lovely, buys her everything an' she thinks he's fine! Thet's before marriage; what'll it be after, the Lord only knows! The ol' woman can't take the same interest in the house as she used to do when she was a gal. She likes to rest an' Kate gits col' meat fer us; but when her Reddy used to come over, out would come kettles an' pans—nothin' too good fer 'im. Wish I was young ag'in!"

"Mebbe I'll save you the trouble."

"When you come in I was lookin' over Reddy's account. He's owed me forty-seven dollars an' fifty-five cents fer two years an' four months. I've asked him to come over tonight, an' if he don't squar' thet account I'll post him to-morrow mornin' on the town squar' in big letters. If my darter wants to merry a bankrupt, she kin an' be sorry."

A customer came in and Talbert promptly paid him attention. When the proprietor returned to Jim, the latter had slung his new belt and holster around his waist. The new revolver was ready for use, resting securely on the left thigh. The old and tried revolver likewise hung on the right thigh.

"Talby, you wouldn't mind havin' me help you in the deal, would you?" asked Jim.

"Tell you what, Jim, you hide behin' the counter, an' when he comes in you kin be ready to help me. When I ask fer the money he'll fool 'roun', makin' excuses; then I'll sail into him an' tell him he's got to leave my darter alone. He'll git rippin' mad, an' then I'll tell him what I think of him. He may try violence. You'll be on han' an' we'll throw thet monkey out into the street!"

"He! he! he! Talby; thought you had a dead liver—he! he! Think of the exercise!" Jim laughed.

"By jingo! my ol' liver's wakin' up an' I feel the moss already flyin'!" and Talbert chuckled with the thought of the forthcoming excitement.

At this moment Kate entered the store.

"Good evenin', Miss Kate," said Jim, taking off his sombrero.

"Hello, Jim," she replied, passing him with hardly a glance. "Dad, where kin I fin'——"

"Kate, why don't you speak to Jim? You hardly gave him a pleasant look."

"Does Jim want me to stan' an' grin at him?"

"Kate," Jim interrupted, "you know what yore dad means. You know what I mean. You look at nobody but Reddy. Us fellers what calls on you like to be treated decent. You're jus' a-breakin' yore ol' dad's heart by keepin' company with Reddy!"

"How does that concern you?" she flashed.

"'Caus' I hate to see you hoodooed. Kate, you're jus' natcherally locoed over that feller. He's foolin' you. You know I love you, an' 'cause I do love you I'm goin' to tell you somethin' in the presence of yore dad."

"I don't want to hear it, an' I won't hear it," she said. "You are all against him, an' I won't listen to you."

"Kate," said her father. "Come here. I want you to listen to Jim. He has somethin' fer you to hear, an' he never speaks unless the matter is very important. Go ahead, Jim."

"Dad, I'll stop my ears—I'll run away. You can't treat me this way. I'll merry the man I love, an' that's Reddy!"

"Very well, Kate," said Jim, "you kin merry him—but no man kin love two wives."

"What do you mean?" she asked in a dazed way.

"I mean, Kate, that this yer Reddy is no good; he's a merried man!"

"You don't say so!" Talbert exclaimed.

"Las' night I tol' him that he wasn't fit to merry the devil," said Jim. "I tol' him that he was a merried man, an' I was a-goin' to tell Kate. He threatened to kill me, if I did—that's why I'm wearin' these 'guns.' The triggers are tied back, an' Reddy better watch out, 'cause I'm a-goin' to shoot to kill!"

Kate left the room without another word.

"Poor gal," said Talbert, "she's be'n tricked. Jim, you didn't tell her a lie jus' to put her against Reddy?"

"I only tol' her the truth, Talby, jus' to save her from that dog! He ought to be lynched! I'd like to git a rope 'roun' his neck an' drag him behind my bronc—I'd drag him as low as he'd like to drag Kate!"

"Jus' think of her lovin' that whiskey barrel! I don't believe in makin' yore children merry yore choice, but I do believe thet they ought to listen to you. When you're in love you can't see any faults, so you ought to reason with someone else. I wasn't 'gainst Reddy jus' 'cause he sold whiskey, but I always felt that he was a scoundrel. Of course, he had winnin' ways with him, an' he's good-lookin', an' he's spent considerable money on her, an' Kate's fell head over heels in love with 'im. Now, she's foun' out what he is."

"Yes, an' I s'pose she'll think all men are the same. She kin think it of me, fer all I care. I've spoilt Reddy's little game, an' he kin fight it out with me."

"Be keerful, Jim; he's a tough customer."

"Not so tough that a .45 can't break his hide." Jim took the new revolver from its holster, twirled the cylinder, made sure that every chamber was filled, and tried the action of the hammer. "She's a fine 'gun,' Talby; works like a clock. Reddy may be able to throw whiskey bottles in his barroom, but when he's in front of this, lookin' down the throat—"

"We don't want no killin' if we kin avoid it; but if Reddy pulls his 'guns,' Jim, you'd better git busy in a hurry!"

Jim had almost put the new revolver back in its holster (his position was that of one about to draw) when the front doorway was filled by a huge form. From the slouchy, broad-brimmed hat red curls fell almost to the massive shoulders, and dark eyes glared like coals of fire. The high-heeled boots, heavy shirt and loosely knotted kerchief at the throat gave to the wearer a graceful appearance. This was the man who had fooled Kate!

Without a word Reddy and Jim jerked loose their "guns" and went at it! When the people rushed into the smoky room, Reddy lay on his face and Jim was dizzily supporting himself on his elbow. Four big six-shooters were on the floor, with blackened chambers. The weapons had been in the hands of experts, and they had used them with terrible effect!

"Whar's the sheriff?" asked one. "Somebody go fer him."

"Dad, you're hurt!" cried Kate, bursting into the room pale with excitement.

"No, Kate," said Talby. "Tell yer what, the a'r was plumb full o' lead! Hullo! somebudy's hurt?"

"I'm done fer, Talby," said Jim. "I'm shot," and he sank back with a groan.

"Jim," cried Kate, kneeling by him in deep remorse, and catching up his head in her arms, "I'm the cause of this!"

"Kate," he said, opening his eyes and looking at her, "I couldn't let that red devil merry you."

"I didn't know," she said. "I didn't know, Jim; I'm so young! Thought I knew more than my ol' daddy—I believed Reddy—but he fooled me, Jim! I believed him, Jim! He spoke so good to me! Oh! Jim, if I could only die!" and she buried her face in Jim's breast.

"Come, Kate," said her father, "Jim's badly hurt an' you're pressin' him. Some of you fellers carry him in the next room."

"What'll we do with Reddy?" asked one.

"Take him out an' hang him to the firs' pole you kin find!" said Talbert.

"What's all this?" demanded the sheriff, entering.

"A little shootin' scrape," replied a bystander.

"Why, it's Reddy an' Jim," said the sheriff. "Who started it?"

"I started it," said Kate.

"You!" the sheriff exclaimed. "How?"

"He broke my heart!" Kate cried, pointing at Reddy. "Jim fought him. Wish I was dead!" she sobbed.

Jim managed to lift his arm and put it around her neck. His strength was going fast.

"Kate," he said, "I love you, gal. Don't cry, 'cause I won't be with you long."

"Jim," she said, "you ain't dyin'?"

"'Fraid I am; I'm gittin' so weak."

"Jim, how kin I live without you?"

"There's a ring on my finger—take it off an' wear it. If any man asks you to merry him an' doubts yore good name, show him the ring an' tell him I loved you! If he's a man, he'll merry you."

Jim lived only a few days. Kate stayed with him night and day and when they laid him to rest, she threw herself upon his grave and cried as if her heart would break. She visited the spot every day for a week. Then one night she did not return home.

CHAPTER VIII

AT THE WATERHOLE

WHEN Harry Western accepted the job of drive cook, he knew he would be monarch of all he surveyed. The cowpunchers had no shelter but their heavy blankets; the cook had his wagon in which he slept, protected from the winds and the storms, and he slept alone.

In some cases, a cook's art being criticised, he immediately resented the insult with his six-shooter and so added a notch on its handle. But Harry had no such trouble, because he could cook.

One morning he peered out through the canvas folds of the cook-wagon into the coming day; the sweeping breeze of the plains brushed cool and fresh against his face. On the ground lay dark forms of sleeping men. The cook got down and soon made a fire, over which hung an iron kettle. Then he unfastened the cover of the "chuck-box" at the back of his wagon and had a table and pantry at hand with flour and meat and other necessities. Pots and pans, knives and forks, tin dishes and cups came rattling out and the table was set without cloth on the dusty, hoof-beaten soil.

Dark figures moved about the camp—some unrolling from their blankets, others carrying their blankets to a wagon, while a few were hurriedly washing in pails.

In a short time breakfast was served. The men ate heartily, talking between mouthfuls, and were soon ready for work. The tin cups and the plates were tossed in a heap near the fire as the men finished their meal. Then the stillness of the morning was broken by whistling "ropes" mid horses trying to escape, and the shouts and laughter of the men capturing them. The horses had been rounded-up by the "wrangler" before breakfast, and now they crowded and crushed in the small rope corral. But they could not escape. Each man's "rope" picked out a mount, and the sulky beast was quickly saddled. The bronchos pitched at first, but were soon brought under submission.

The night herders were relieved and they hurried to breakfast. As Harry approached with some coffee, he heard one ask, "Hear anythin' on yore side las' night?"

"Nuthin' unusual," replied the other.

"Well, somethin' was monkeyin' on mine. Don't know whether it was any trouble or not, but it kept me guessin'. More than once I clicked my 'gun' just to warn 'em I was wise. By jinks, it wouldn't surprise me one bit if we run into Apache Kidd this trip!" declared the first.

"Apache Kidd?" asked Harry. "I thought they got him."

"They did; but he got away ag'in."

"Got away? An' how?"

"Why, a gang of fellers tried to take him from jail an' lynch him the same night. Everybody, includin' the sheriff, had gone to bed when they rode up. Apache Kidd heard 'em an' was ready. When they broke open his door, it only left enough room fer one man at a time to enter, an' as the leader jumped in with a 'gun' in each hand yellin' fer him to come on, Apache Kidd hit him from behind the door a terrible blow on the chin with his fist an' the feller dropped like a log! Apache Kidd grabbed a 'gun' an' waited; they couldn't see him, nor could they hit him behind the iron door, but he could see them because they had lanterns. Keepin' the openin' covered, he slowly drew the feller to him an' got his other 'gun' an' his cartridge belt. He was in fine shape now, an' he begun to tantalize 'em.

" 'Why don't you come in?' he says. 'I'm only one ag'in a hundred. I kin only kill one at a time. Thar's only twelve bullets in yore friend's 'guns'—thanks to him—an' after I kill the first twelve, you ought to git me afore I load up ag'in. Come on, boys; who's a-goin' to be the first an' the second an' the third, etc.? Hurry up, afore the sheriff finds out an' scares you away!'

"But they couldn't enter. Not one had the nerve to, an' he held 'em off till the sheriff an' the law-abidin' citizens chased 'em away. In the excitement of it all Apache Kidd sneaked out, jumped on somebody's hoss an' escaped."

"You don't say so!" Harry exclaimed.

"Yes, sir, he escaped. That Jack Morris was a perty smart kid to capture the bandit the way he done—but he certainly did a fool thing to give him up to the sheriff! Apache Kidd ought to 've be'n lynched on the spot an' done away with. As it was, he was given a chanct an' he took it."

"What become of Jack Morris?" Harry inquired.

"Oh, he skipped out, you bettcher life! He didn't want to make explanations."

"Wasn't Apache Kidd his father?"

"He must 've be'n something, or Jack wouldn't 've done such a fool thing! Yet, it must be a perty hard thing fer Jack to lynch his own father, an' I reckon he done the best he could. Jack was on the squar' all right, everybody acknowledged that. But at the same time, everybody called him a fool."

"I've heard that Jack kin shoot some," remarked one of the herders.

"Shoot!" exclaimed the first. "Well, I guess! He kin shoot some an' some ag'in! Shootin's jus' as easy fer him as it is fer Harry, here, to make good coffee. Why, I've seen Jack tie a bottle up with the neck downward, an' the cork right under the mouth, an' he'd cut that string with his six-shooter standin' as far away as his eyes could see, an' the bottle would fall on the cork an' pick it up as nice as anybody could cork a bottle. Yes, sir! The trick is original, an' if you want to savvy the difficulty of the execution, just you try it! But you'd better try it by yore lonesome first, or yore friends will have the laugh on you."

After a short pause Harry said: "I kain't just savvy how Apache Kidd could escape with so many around."

"You kain't?" asked the first herder. "Well, you see, them fellers wanted him awful bad an' when the sheriff objected they had a leetle argument an' bullets flew thicker 'n hail. I reckon Apache Kidd put in a few fer the sheriff, too. And durin' the fusillade he dug out in a big hurry. When the sheriff drove off the lynchers, he discovered that his bird had flew the coop. Then he turned his 'gun' on himself an' well,—Give me another cup of coffee, Kid, it certainly touches the right spot!"

Harry poured the coffee and sat down to eat. The meal was soon finished and he hurriedly washed the dishes.

"That's right, Kid," said the first herder; "git a rustle on you; we mus' ketch up with the fellers as soon as possible: no tellin' how many Injuns are sneakin' 'roun'." And the speaker swept the horizon with a glance. "Say!" he exclaimed, "what's that leetle cloud of dust over thar?" He pointed toward the mountains in the south.

The little band watched it intently.

"The wind ain't makin' it," said the fourth herder, presently. "It ain't no 'sky devil'."

"I think I see hosses," said the third.

"The joke is," said the first, "who's on 'em? I reckon we'd better be prepared anyway. Each one better have a bronc saddled. One pack hoss will do fer us all."

In a short time everything was ready and they waited the approach. The dust cloud grew heavier.

"Injuns!" exclaimed Harry.

"You're right, Kid," replied the first herder. "To the waterhole, boys!"

A moment later the little band crouched in the hole and six Winchesters pointed defiantly over the edge, commanding all sides. When the Indians came within rifle range of the pit, their chief left them and rode parallel with it. About fifty yards behind him an Indian followed; about fifty yards behind the second another Indian rode, and behind him at the same distance followed another, and so on till the entire band was stretched out in a long line. The chief drew in a little toward the pit—followed by the band—till he had ridden around it. Then around they rode again, a little faster and drawing nearer. Again they rode around. And again, and again, each time drawing closer. Presently they rode the circle within range of the pit and opened fire.

"Don't shoot," commanded the first herder. "We mustn't waste our bullets. Wait till they come nearer. I reckon thar's white men amongst 'em—if they are dressed in Injun's clothes. Look at thar chief now! Did you ever see an Injun ride that-a-way? Look at that third feller back. He's an Injun shore—he's usin' his legs to hold on his pony."

Slowly the circle drew in and bullets whistled overhead the pit or kicked the dust in front and behind. Often the cowboys sighted their Winchesters and measured the distance.

"I reckon it's about time, Kid," said the leader, "to git thar range. Jus' see if you kin call thar attention."

Harry carefully sighted his weapon and fired. There was a second's expectancy. Then the chief's horse seemed to stagger.

"By jinks, Kid!" cried the leader, "you've hit! You've hit! Bully fer you, Kid!"

The wounded horse stumbled and fell. Had not its rider been watchful, he would have been crushed. With an effort the chief steadied himself and shook his rifle at the pit. It was Cap'n Kidd!

He was answered with a triumphant yell from the waterhole.

One of the Indians gave his pony to Cap'n Kidd, and with wild, discordant, high-keyed cries the entire band continued the circle, firing as fast as they could load.

For nearly six hours the pit kept them at bay.

"Got any bullets, Ford?" called one of the herders.

"Not more than six," the leader replied through his teeth. He turned again with his hot Winchester cocked and resting almost on the ground and he gazed fiercely at the circling figures.

Harry Western lay near him, his elbows resting on the soil to steady his aim. Methodically the sights picked out a mark on a living object in the distance; he was in the act of pulling the trigger when he uttered a sharp cry and sank down.

"What's the matter, Kid?" asked the leader, turning. "Ah! the pore kid's shot! Well, boy, you're better off than us!"

He crept over and took off Harry's cartridge belt. Then he knelt, peeped over the edge, gritted his teeth and fired. With a savage yell he noted that his bullet had struck home!

Ten minutes later one of the cowboys uttered a gladsome cry: "They're comin'! They're comin'!"

The others turned their blood-shot eyes, followed the direction of his finger and saw a large cloud of dust rise above a band of galloping figures.

The Indians, too, discovered the party coming, and with a few scattering shots they broke and fled.

When the cook outfit had failed to catch up with the drive, the boss felt uneasy and so sent one of his men in quest, and he dashed back with the news that he heard continued firing in the direction of the waterhole. Immediately the men rode to the rescue.

Everyone in the pit had suffered from one or more wounds.

"Is the kid dead?" asked the boss.

"I dunno. He hasn't moved since he was hit."

The boss and the first herder walked over to where Harry lay. The boss stooped and felt his pulse.

"He ain't dead," said he, and opened Harry's shirt to find the wound. "By gosh!" he cried, rising, *"he's a woman!"*

They stared at each other in amazement.

"Shore, *he's a woman!*" said the other, after a silence. "I wonder why?"

But they did not find out the reason, nor that her right name was Kate Talbert. When she recovered, she left Arizona.

PART III

THE PASSING OF THE SIX-SHOOTER

CHAPTER IX

"INSPIRATION IS BLIND"

THE sun was sinking beneath the western horizon as Jack Morris rode his wiry broncho over the plains of New Mexico. He hummed a merry tune, keeping company with his thoughts, which must have been pleasant, judging by his song. Now and then his horse turned back its ears to listen more attentively, and nodded his head to show his appreciation of his master's efforts.

Jack sat straight up in his heavy saddle, his body motionless except through the swinging lope of his broncho. The plainsman and his horse were a model for some great artist, whose inspired brush would have painted these hardy creatures in colors that would have spoken volumes.

Jack's song in time reached its climax, the final note made the broncho shake its head, and the singer laughed. What was the cause? He could not have told you. He had had many ups and downs; but to-day his heart was light, and Wagon Mound was many miles behind.

Very soon the Cimarron River appeared in the distance, and the rider's heart gladdened at the welcome sight. "Calico" quickened his pace, for he knew that water, food and rest awaited him.

The travelers approached the river like old friends. "Calico" was enjoying a cooling draught, and Jack was bathing his dusty face — when a shriek was borne across the water by the evening breeze! The plainsman jumped to his feet, looking intently toward the direction from which the sound came. "Calico" raised his head and laid back his ears—again, that terrible cry!

A horse struggling in the quicksand greeted Jack's straining eyes. Scanning the spot more keenly, he saw a hand waving frantically in the air, and he sprang into the saddle without using the stirrups, as "Calico" leaped to the rescue, knowing by the actions of his master that there must be no delay. On, on they dashed! Arriving nearly abreast of the slowly sinking victim, Jack dismounted and cast his "rope." "Put it under yore arms," he called. "Hold on tight," he continued, wheeling "Calico." The "rope" straightened, and its burden slowly but surely answered the strain. Jack dismounted, drew the young woman to the bank and helped her to reach a place of safety.

"Are you—?" he began. But he was cut short by a wild neigh coming again from the sinking horse.

"Poor Lem!" she cried, "poor, poor Lem!" The beast gave a snort of rage and despair, as the horrible trap slowly swallowed him from sight. "Oh, it's awful!" the owner exclaimed, covering her eyes. "Poor Lem —poor fellow!"

They stood silently watching the spot; it had engulfed its prey, shut its greedy mouth, and the river flowed placidly onward, waiting for the next one that might venture that way.

At last Jack was aroused by "Calico," who rubbed his nose against his master's arm, as if to praise him for his timely rescue.

"Awful, Cal, awful!" Jack said, misunderstanding the dumb beast's actions.

"Yes," the girl cried, with a shudder. She was thinking how near the fate had been her own!

Jack saw her shiver, and said: "Pardon, Miss, but the night's chilly an' you're wet. Let me take you to some place of warmth."

He untied the blanket from the cantle of his saddle and wrapped it about her shivering form. Her eyes thanked him more than words could have done as he helped her to mount "Calico."

A mile further up they found a safe place to cross, forded the river and continued over the plains. For a time silence reigned between them, but as the distance grew and the river was put far behind, the woman warmed into conversation.

"I suppose," she said, "you wonder how it happened."

"Wouldn't min' knowin'," Jack said.

"It was an inspiration," she replied. "Did you ever get an inspiration?"

"H'm—a gal once inspired—"

"Oh, I don't mean that kind of an inspiration," she interrupted. "Did you ever become inspired through your work? So interested that you knew nothing of what was going on around you?"

"I have been so interested in ropin' a cow that I didn't see the gopher hole an' suddenly awakened in the dust. Felt like an ol' rooster takin' his dust bath!" smiled Jack.

"That was an odd inspiration!"

"Ha! ha!" he laughed, "guess you've got the drop on me in the inspiration line; when it comes to hosses, cows, ropes, saddles and guns, I kin say a few."

They were interrupted by "Calico" who turned his head to his master as much as to say, "It's a long time since you've spoken to me."

Jack patted the animal's neck, and said: "Never mind, ol' boy, it's all in a life-time; thar's plenty of time—plenty of time!"

"You are kind to your horse," she smiled, admiringly, knowing that a horse was treated with little kindness on the plains.

"He's my bes' friend—except Hank. He works on the Maxwell Ranch."

"Oh, then you're Jack Morris! Hank has often spoken of you." She added: "I hope you will henceforth consider me your friend, and if you ever need assistance, call on May Maxwell."

"Well!—struck it perty lucky! I was goin' to Colonel Pierre Maxwell's ranch to git a job."

"Then you shall have it."

"Heard he was a fine feller to work fer, an' thought I'd try to git a place on his ranch. I'm lucky!"

"You forget that to you I owe my life," she said.

"Miss Maxwell," said Jack, "us rough fellers don't care fer anythin'; but even the meanest is proud to feel the frien'ship of a good woman!"

She gave him a grateful look and as he met her gaze his heart throbbed; over him came stealing thoughts of the comforts of a home —even the wildest beast has its den, and the longing for a companion. With new interest awakened they looked at each other in silence; each felt an inward happiness, that neither could explain.

The silence would have become embarrassing had it continued much longer, but "Calico" again came to the rescue and neighed.

"Thar's the lights of a town," Jack said. "Cal sees 'em; he always neighs comin' in."

"That is Maxwell City," said May. "We will soon be home. What a home-coming!"

Once more "Calico" blew his trumpet.

"Well, well, Cal, hol' yore hosses, you crazy! We're gittin' thar as fast as we kin!"

"That is the way I talked to poor Lem," May sighed. "How could I have been so careless! I ought to have noticed that the river had formed quicksand—but for you, my inspiration would have proved fatal." He saw her shudder and wishing to divert her mind from the incident, said, "I've a curiosity to ask what could have inspired you so, if it's a fair question?"

"I am writing a comedy," she replied. "My cousin is an actor-playwright, and he comes here to get plots. I am much interested in his art."

Jack discerned that she was talking on a subject of great interest to her, and, although he did not understand anything about plays, he knew that, if he could keep her mind occupied, it would banish all unpleasant thoughts, hence he did his part in the conversation.

"What do you call it?" he asked.

" 'Love is Blind'," she answered.

"H'm —funny, ain't it? Better change it to 'Inspiration is Blind'."

"That would be a good title in my case," she said. "I might call it 'The Fatal Inspiration,' it came so near being a tragedy."

"You bet!" Jack agreed. "When I went into Frisco once with a bunch of cows, I took in a show. A feller on the stage made the boys so mad—well, a little white-faced feller came out an' said he hoped we would please remember we were seein' a mimic murder —not the real thing."

"If you lost your heads on seeing the play," she said, smiling, "how do you suppose the person feels when writing such stirring scenes, when under the spell of an inspiration? You see why I so blindly rode to my destruction?"

They soon entered the town, where Jack procured a horse for himself, and they reached their destination in due time.

Colonel Pierre Maxwell was reading a paper in his den. As the hours crept slowly by, he wondered what could be keeping May. Since the tragedy of many years ago at Dodge City, Kansas, he was nervous and always fretted in the absence of his daughter. She was to have been home early.

When May Maxwell and Jack Morris entered the room, the Colonel noticed his daughter's disarranged hair, and the blanket about her shoulders.

"What under the sun—!" he exclaimed, rising. What meant this confusion and this stranger? She told her simple story, and the grateful father, then and there, poured out his heart to Jack! "And so," he added, "you're the famous Jack Morris of Wagon Mound! You didn't do a thing to them cattle-thieves!"

Jack made no reply, but stood somewhat embarrassed.

"An' now," continued the Colonel, "you've saved my daughter's life! How kin I thank you?"

"By not mentionin' it ag'in, Colonel," said Jack, uneasily shifting his big sombrero.

When Jack met Hank, their hands came together with a loud, resounding clasp, and they warmly saluted each other.

"Say, what have you be'n tryin' to do?" grinned Hank. Before Jack could answer, he continued: "Reckon savin' the Colonel's darter is a better recommendation than I kin give you, an' I reckon that job is your'n. You'll shore be an established fixture here now—an' mark me, Jack, you won't be a cook nor a cowpuncher, nuther, but you'll be a boss, or" (and he winked at his friend) "half-owner of the dug-gun ranch!"

"Fellers," said Hank, to the other hands in the bunk-house before retiring, "you don't want to start nothin' with Jack Morris. Don't ever speak disrespectful of the women folks when he's aroun'—he'll shore muss you up inside an' outside!"

"Mebbe we kin do a leetle mussin' ourselves!" barked Green.

Hank turned pitifully upon him. "Green," said he, compassionately, "he wouldn't leave even a grease spot of you!" Green disdained to reply, but grinned sneeringly. "Jack's shootin' irons are as quick as the claws of a panther. An' the stroke of a rattler is twenty minutes late. I tell you what, Green, he don't trouble nobody till they starts the malee. He shore is a fine feller! I was with him at Wagon Mound an' I know!"

"How much is he payin' you, Hank," slurred Green, *"to blow his tin horn?"*

"Green," said Hank, calmly, "onct a fool like you drew his gun on Jack. But Jack hated to kill him, so jus' as the feller pulled his trigger, Jack aimed at the muzzle an' fired! The bullets met 'bout half-way, an whack! *they flattened into a big star of lead an fell to the ground!* With deep reespect an' overflowin' admiration spread all over his face, the fool crawled up to Jack an' begged his pardon. Shootin', Green, is jus' pie fer Jack! *Likewise, gentlemen of yore character!"*

CHAPTER X

"RECKON WE'RE ON THE SAME MISSION"

THE Maxwell home ranch stables, bunk-house and mess-house were some hundred yards behind the Colonel's residence. All were made of heavy logs and adobe blocks. A thick adobe wall completely surrounded them, making an invincible stronghold in the early days of warfare with the Indians.

Jack Morris, of course, ate and slept with the ranch hands. Shortly after his arrival he was invited to visit May Maxwell's den in her father's house. "A piano!" he exclaimed, as he entered. "Do you play?"

"A little," she smiled. "Do you like music?"

"I'm simply locoed over it! But I don't git much chance to hear it—only in the barroom."

"Mr. Morris, you shall never have to go there again for music."

"I won't," he faltered, looking at the piano. "But, Miss Maxwell, what kin a feller do when that is his only place for amusement? You know how us fellers feel after workin' out on the range. We're crazy fer a little excitement, an' when we hit town an' the saloon is the only place whar they'll take us in, whar kin we go but there?"

"Yes, yes, I know," said the Colonel's daughter, sadly. She had lived among the cowmen most of her life, and she knew their temptations. She walked to the piano and ran her fingers idly over the keys in a few chords. "Mr. Morris, I wish you would come here when you feel that you would like to hear music; I shall be glad to play for you."

"Thank you," he replied. "I'll come. I promised my dyin' mother never to enter a saloon. But that promise was one too many fer me! I couldn't help it—I couldn't."

"Like you pulled me out of that awful quicksand hole with your rope, Mr. Morris, I am going to draw you out of the saloon. You will always be welcome here, and I shall be happy to play for you. I love music myself and I spend much time at my piano. Then when you get tired of my playing, there are books and cards and good things to eat. Surely these are better than the barroom?"

"They shore are! But I wasn't always so

favored —till I come here. You an' the Colonel are too good to me—too good!"

"Look at poor Billy. You wouldn't care to ruin your life like he has?"

Jack shook his head. She turned to the piano and played and sang softly. As he stood beside her and listened to the awful story of the drunkard's grave, told with pathetic expression, his emotions were moved to the bottom of his soul. He slowly walked away and seated himself near the window. The full moon was up and Jack looked out upon the glorious night, but seeing not, as his thoughts were carried along by the music. How different it was from the cheap tunes he had often ridden miles to hear in the noisy barroom. The singer forgot her listener and sang divinely!

Then he became aware that the room was quiet. He glanced toward the piano. "Don't go," he begged. "Please play some more. I love music!"

"So do I. Often when I feel blue or tired, I sit at my piano and very soon I am myself again. Music is a wonderful solace."

Jack came to the instrument. "You kain't guess the big treat you've given me —no, you kain't ever guess," he said gratefully. "I love music! An' now, this evenin' in the quiet of yore home, it has stirred me to the very depths, an' I thank you, Miss Maxwell!"

"The pleasure is mine, Mr. Morris," she smiled; "never have I had so ardent an admirer. You do not know what a gratification it is to play for you," and she began an old, familiar song.

"I know it," he said. "I've often sung it out on the plains to the 'cows' on the drive."

"To the 'cows'?" she exclaimed.

"Shore," he replied. "Jus' hear how it fits 'em when they're bedded down at night: 'Sleep, my little one, sleep, my pretty one, sleep.' "

"Doesn't it!" she exclaimed, as she arose to answer a knock at the door. Red Nose Bill entered.

"Good evenin', Mr. Clark," Jack said, rising from the comfortable chair and extending his hand to the new arrival.

"Mr. Clark? Who, me?" Red Nose Bill asked in an awkward, puzzled way.

"Isn't yore name Mr. William Clark?" Jack smiled, shaking his hand.

"Shore, shore, my ol' woman an' ol' man used to call me by that appellation, but I ain't heard it fer so long I'd fergotten it almos'. Good evenin', good evenin'! Reckon we're on the same mission," he grinned.

"Same mission?" Jack repeated.

"Why, to spoon with the Colonel's darter," Bill whispered in the other's ear.

Jack flushed uncomfortably as he walked toward a chair, and he sat down very ill at ease.

Bill stood in the middle of the room, grinning and twisting a button on his coat.

"He! he! he! Miss May. I come fer to tell youse of how the fellers tried to beg me to go to town with 'em an' booze, but how, fer yore sake, I reclined! I didn't mean to trespass nor encroach on the reservation of yore company; but when you're disembarrassed an' are at liberty to give me the abundance of yore disengaged attention, I'd like to ask a leetle advice."

"Sit down, Mr. Clark," said May, "and I shall tell Mr. Morris of your brave struggle."

"An', Miss," said Bill, "tell 'im—tell 'im how youse, the wealthy darter of a wealthy cattleman, helped me. Tell 'im all, Miss."

"I should rather have you tell it, Mr. Clark," she replied; "you know it better than I do. Your story might help Mr. Morris some, because we know that he is now 'tasting only a few drops,' and it was just the 'few drops' at first that brought you to shame and lost ambition."

"Yes, sir!" Bill said, earnestly, "the Colonel's darter is a regular missionary to us fellers, an' I don't kere how bad we are, she'll git us alone an' preach till you almos' wished you was good. But how a rich lady kin take so much bother with a pore devil like me, is more than I kin tell! Like all dug-gun fools, I begin early with only a 'few drops,' an' now—now I kain't let it alone!"

"Yes, you can," Miss Maxwell said, resolutely.

"Miss, you don't know how hard I try. But as long as they sell whiskey —as long as they make whiskey, I've got to have it!"

"No, no, you don't. Pray to God for strength."

"I—I have, Miss, but it ain't done me no good. He'll listen to you—but me, it ain't no use!"

"Last month you earned half pay," she said encouragingly.

"That's so! Put it all in the bank, too!"

"You refused the boys to-night."

"'Cause I thought of you; I knew it would hurt. I don't like to hurt yer feelin's, Miss. The fellers twitted me 'bout bein' in love with you, an' I says: 'What if I am?' Then they says: 'Better look out fer that new black-headed guy who saved her life; he'll cut you out. A man don't save a woman's life fer nothin'.' An' then, soft an' easy like, they asked me to go to town, drink an' fergit 'bout you."

"And you would not give in to them?" she praised.

"But, Miss, that's what I'm 'fraid of: I'll drink more than ever when I kain't stan' it no longer!"

"Guess we're hopeless cases," Jack said, as he noticed her give a little sigh.

She flashed him a reproachful glance for admitting that he was on the same level with Red Nose Bill. "Not quite," she answered. "There is always hope. *Hope is the steam of life!"*

"That's what's the matter with me," said Red Nose Bill. "I've be'n so full of 'steam' that I've exploded!"

Jack arose from his chair. "Guess I had better be goin', Miss Maxwell," he said. "I've enjoyed yore singin' very much; you don't know what a treat it has be'n to me."

"I shall always be happy to sing to you," she said, softly, "Come again."

"That's a joke," Bill snickered, as the door closed on his rival. "I've out-stayed him! Wouldn't wonder if yer new feller was a leetle mad at me."

"Billy," she rebuked, "you must learn to be more polite!"

There was a little pause. The Colonel's daughter took a sheet of paper from the piano, and handed it to Red Nose Bill, saying: "I wrote you these little verses. Go with them to the bunkhouse and read them carefully."

"Kain't I read 'em here?"

She shook her head.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," he said, walking toward the door.

"Not until you have learned those verses by heart."

"Wall, I s'pose that means I'll have to say good-night," he sighed. "Say, honest, you shorely don't mean I have to learn this blamed poultry all by heart? By jinks! I see through you, you want to have that new feller alone—you know it will take me ferever to learn this. I kain't learn it in a hundred years! Didn't I tell that new guy I 'reckon we're on the same mission'? Yes sir, me an' him are rivals!"

"Billy, Billy! You are talking nonsense! Good-night!"

"Huh!—Oh, good-night, Miss. Hope you have pleasant dreams. I'm a-goin' to stay up the hull dug-gun night a-learnin' these verses! I'll be ready to recite 'em to you by to-morrow evenin'."

"I'll have some more written for you by that time," she smiled. "Good-night. Be sure you go straight to the bunk-house!"

As she went to the piano she noticed a handkerchief lying on the floor beside the chair Jack Morris had occupied, and almost at the same instant a knock sounded on the door.

"Miss Maxwell," said Jack, "I'm awfully sorry to disturb you, but did you happen to find a handkerchief?"

"Here it is. Won't you come in?"

"No, I guess not," he hesitatingly replied.

"I should like to make apologies to you."

"What fer, Miss Maxwell?"

"Have a chair and I'll explain to you: I think you were put out with Billy. He did not know how to act and I sent him to the bunk-house. He cannot call here until he has learned some verses by heart. Wouldn't you like to play a game of cards or checkers?"

"I'd rather play checkers," he smiled.

She placed the checkerboard on her writing table. They sat down and the game began in earnest.

"Oh!" she cried. "Two men at a jump!" They heard a knock. "Another interruption," she said, rising. "You can have a chance to study the board," and she opened the door.

"I've learned them dug-gun verses!" said Bill. "I've come to say them off to you."

"Hang that fool!" Jack exclaimed, and his arm brushed some checkers off. "Now, I've done it!"

"It is impossible to learn them by heart so soon," said May.

"Youse jus' take this paper an' listen."

"I shall on the condition if you fail on just one word, you will be excused to study it over."

"Youse jus' listen to me," Billy persisted.

Jack squared around in the chair and frowned on the intruder.

"Come, let us hear you recite the verses," May said, impatiently, but not unkindly.

Billy cleared his throat and grinned. He tried to speak the first word but it stuck in his thoat, and he grinned harder than ever. Then he put his right foot on his left one, and twisted a button. "Gosh, reckon I forgot how! Kain't I read it, Miss?"

"No, you know our bargain?"

Billy scratched his head. "If I could only see the firs' word," he said, "the res' would follee shore. You see, it's always hard to git a start in anythin'; when a feller gits a boost, the rest is easy." She turned away. "Aw, you're too duggun hard on a feller!"

"A bargain's a bargain!" she said, persistently.

"Why don't you make him learn some verses, too?"

Jack sprang up, unable to contain himself any longer: "Say, you, git out of here, quick!"

"Don't have to!" said Bill.

"Billy," the Colonel's daughter commanded, "leave the room. You have acted very ungentlemanly toward Mr. Morris."

"An' I'll know them verses by to-morrow evenin' — Say, mister, you needn't think you'll be here, nuther. We're on the same mission, an' I guess I kin learn poultry as good as you kin!" He went out and Jack sat playing with the checkers.

"Mr. Morris, I hope you will pardon Billy's insults. He does not know his place and I shall prohibit him from coming here. I tried to help him, but he has overstepped the limits. Shall we continue our game?"

"I knocked the men screw-gee when I jumped up. We'll have to start over ag'in. But I would rather listen to you sing. I don't think I'm in the mood for games. Won't you please play me something?"

"Would you like to hear a ballad of the plains?"

"Yes," he smiled. "Did you write it?"

"That's the reason it's in manuscript. It was after you saved my life I got the inspiration and wrote this song."

"I'd think you'd be afraid of any more inspirations, after yore experience."

"Oh, no," she laughed. "But next time I was careful where I had my inspiration, and you're the hero of this one."

"Is that the way you write things—go 'roun' sizin' folks up?"

"I always study human nature everywhere. When I see a strange face on the street, I try to remember it. Many of the boys on the ranch and even the Colonel are characters in stories."

May Maxwell's voice had the untrammeled sweetness of a skylark's, and the ballad she sang was a simple and touching one.

"Did you write that?" Jack asked. "By jinks! that's fine!"

Again a knock interrupted them, and Hank's voice at the door declared: "Say, Jack, Cal's got the colic."

"What!" Jack cried, rising hastily, "Cal has the colic, an' the race comin' off to-morrow? Good-night, Miss Maxwell," and shaking her hand he hurried toward the door.

CHAPTER XI

A HOLIDAY AT MAXWELL RANCH

OVERHEAD the scorching sun was pouring its rays upon the adobe road, which reflected the heat back into the air. But New Mexico is not a land of distressful temperature, low humidity giving it a comfortable summer climate. One might say the sun shines every day. In the shade, which is invariably cool, small groups of spectators were collecting and talking about the horse race that Colonel Pierre Maxwell gave every year for the pleasure of his ranch hands. His home ranch barnyard presented a very lively scene. More cowboys were arriving, their arms flopping, their bandanas streaming, and their sombreros flapping. Light spring wagons, buckboards, and buggies were drawn toward the ranch by swift horses. Indians were riding to the race on little ponies. All cattleland for a hundred miles around would be there. Money and wagers were not lacking. It was second nature to them to bet and they were not backward. The cowman's passion for horse-racing will make him "go broke", if necessary, in backing a favorite horse of the ranch.

"How's Calico gittin' on?" asked one of Hank.

"Won't be able to run this mornin'," Hank replied. "Off his feed."

"Who's Jack a-goin' to ride?"

"He's hasn't decided yet. Mebbe he'll ride Babe."

Another group was talking near the stable.

"Say, fellers,' said Green, confidentially; "I'll give youse a tip—don't bet on Babe." He dropped his voice very low. "I'm a-goin' to cut the cinch an' when that pie-eatin' Jack Morris gits to comin' down the homestretch—you wait! If the saddle don't come off, I'm a liar!"

"We'll help youse," said Red Nose Bill. "By jinks, this yere Jack Morris from Arizona thinks he owns the hull ranch! We'll take him down a peg. Las' night he called on my gal, an' say, I'm willin' to help youse in anything!"

"I'm bettin' on the Colonel's hoss," said another.

"You're wise," said Green. "Jus' keep a-bettin' that way. I thought I'd jus' give youse fellers the tip."

Another crowd was conversing at the pump.

"That's yer sixth cup," said one to the one drinking.

"Seventh," the one with the cup replied. "I'm awfully dry this mornin'. I'll have to have another."

"Say," said the one at the pump handle, "what hoss you bettin' on?"

"The Colonel's, of course. Who you bettin' on?" Then, extending the cup again: "One more cup an' I'll quit."

"Better go to 'The Owl,' " suggested a third.

"I'm keepin' sober fer the dance to-night."

"Did you bring yer girl?"

"Nope. But, say, mebbe I kin borrow your'n."

"Not on yer life! She's a-goin' to dance every one with me. What do youse think I'm bringin' her fer? Git yer own!"

"Oh, I jus' thought mebbe you'd git tired out an' I'd relieve youse, that's all. You know a girl kin dance all night without the least hesitation. They're built fer it. Onct aroun' puts me on the bum. Didn't ever see no fun in dancin', anyways."

"Hey," said a fifth, "look at John stealin' the soap!"

"I'm a-goin' to soap my boats fer the dance to-night," John grinned. "Makes 'em slippery!"

"Look out fer soap-boobles!" said Green, joining them. "They'll be flyin' all over the room!"

A boisterous laugh followed the remark.

"What's the joke?" Red Nose Bill asked.

"You're twenty minutes late, Bill," one replied. "Soap-boobles! D'you see the p'int?"

"Here's the p'int," said Bill, taking a whiskey bottle from his hip pocket.

" 'Sh!" one exclaimed. "Thar comes the Colonel's darter!"

"Whar?" Bill asked, hiding his bottle.

"The aristocrat's with her, too!" said Green, insinuatingly.

"The 'aristocrat'?"

"Shore," answered Green; "Jack Morris!"

"Him?" sneered Bill. "Oh, he's spoonin' her! I hain't got a bit of a show. You ought to see 'im cut me out last night! He didn't have to learn no verses, either."

"Verses?" laughed the crowd.

"Shore," said Bill; "she give me some to learn afore I could see her ag'in."

"She's tryin' to make Bill a play-actor," grinned Green. "So 'st he kin make love to her in grand style—famously!"

"Thar ain't a word of love in it," said Bill, taking out a piece of paper. "Let me read it to youse."

The crowd broke up with loud protestations.

"Yes, it's too bad," Jack was saying to the Colonel's daughter, as they stood near the stable door. "I would like to 've shown you how fast Calico kin run. He likes to race. I know he'd have done his best to-day."

"What do you suppose was the cause of his sickness?" asked May.

"I'm shore I don't know, unless someone was afraid he might win, an' doped him!"

"I am afraid that two or three of the boys are jealous of you, and perhaps they might have played such an infamous trick!"

There was a pause.

"Well, I'll try to make Babe do her best! Will you excuse me, Miss Maxwell? Guess I'll go an' have a look at Calico. I'd like to have you come, too, if you care to."

"I am very much interested in him," she said.

He held open the door to allow her to enter, and he followed.

"Well, I'll be dug-guned!" Bill exclaimed, looking after them. He leaned against the pump. "No, sir! I didn't never think the Colonel's darter would merry beneath her!"

"Hello, Bill," said a cowpuncher, coming up to the pump. "Warm mornin', ain't it?"

"Kinder. Say, what hoss you bettin' on?"

"I'm a-backin' up the Colonel's. You don't happen to have a chaw 'bout you?"

"Here's some fine-cut. So you're bettin' on the Colonel's hoss?"

"Why, certainly; ain't you?"

"Shore thing. It's easy money, too! Bet ever' cent you've got an' you'll dance better tonight," winked Bill.

Five horses were ridden out of the stable, past the barn, and down the road for a quarter of a mile. Jack followed on "Babe." The spectators crowded at the fence along the road.

"Guess the race is 'bout ready to start," said the Colonel, walking toward the fence.

A pistol shot was faintly heard.

"They're off!" exclaimed the Colonel, and everbody leaned excitedly forward to see!

At the crack of the revolver the six horses sprang to the race in earnest. It was to be a short one, and they dashed onward at high speed toward the tape!

When Jack's horse sprang away at the start, the cinch broke, but as the light saddle fell off, he pulled himself forward by the mane. He dashed after the others. The spectators sent up a great shout. "Go it, go it, Jack!" they yelled, as he struggled gamely to regain lost ground! "Stay with 'em! You're ketchin' 'em! Go after 'em!" The excitement was intense.

"Git back!" someone yelled; "they're comin' on the homestretch!"

"Oh!" exclamations went up, "a fall! They're down! A stumble! Killed! Jack's safe! So's the Colonel's hoss! Look, here they come!"

With a last effort the horses swept by!

The Colonel's horse crossed first, with Jack's a close second, followed by a tenacious sorrel. But the other three did not cross: they were lying in a fallen heap. The bystanders crowded around.

* * * * *

The lights of the mess-house shone brightly, and the sound of the fiddles floated out upon the night air. The Colonel's daughter and Jack reined up their horses and listened.

"Why," said Jack, "they're playin' yore ballad."

"And just think of it, I had a chance to be dancing it!"

"Red Nose Bill?" Jack smiled.

She nodded.

When the fiddles stopped the two equestrians rode away. The couples began coming out into the fresh air. They went directly to the pump.

Hank walked on one side of Betsy, and Red Nose Bill on the other.

"I shorely thought the boys was killed in that fall," said Betsy. "It was a lucky escape. I'm so glad they ain't a-goin' to die, because I wouldn't have danced to-night if they had. Why, here comes the editor!"

"Guess he wants to ask us fer our votes," said Bill. "He's gone into politics."

"Good evenin'," said the editor, tipping his sombrero.

"Good evenin', good evenin'," the others replied.

"Givin' us a great write-up?" Hank asked.

"Four colyums already!" the editor answered. "Do you know how Jack Morris's saddle fell off? They say it was cut with a knife."

"Yes, sir, it was!" said Hank. "Bet yer life! Jack found out that some foxy devil was afraid he'd win the race, an' so cut his cinch with a knife. He figgered the strain would bust the strap. Wait till Jack ketches him!"

"Perty hard to track a knife-cut," said the editor.

"Wall, I've seen Jack foller harder trails. Say, but didn't he ride fine! He perty near won the race in spite of that dirty trick played on him."

There was a pause in which the editor was busy putting down memoranda.

"Say," said Hank, "if you don't put it down right in yer paper, you'll git in trouble!"

"Four colyums!" smiled the editor. "I'll fix it up all right."

The shrill yell of a late plainsman was heard as he spurred his horse toward the dance.

"Somebudy's comin' to join in the frolic," said Bill.

"I'd like a drink of water," said Betsy, impatiently. The men, it seemed, had forgotten her.

"Oh, certainly," said Hank and Bill, both stepping toward the pump.

"Good evenin'," said Green, coming up to Betsy. "I see you're deserted."

"It's funny how at certain times men try to be so obligin'," she said, sarcastically nodding toward Hank and Red Nose Bill at the pump as both were trying to fill the cup at once.

"Don't women try to be?" Green grinned. "Fer instance, how different a gal will treat a man when he asks her to go to a dance with him. Is yer nex' dance engaged?"

"Not yet."

"Kin I have the pleasure?"

She gave him her arm and they entered the hall. Some of the couples began to follow them.

"Yes," said the editor to his fair partner, "if the news continues to boom, I'll be compelled to change my hand-press fer a steam one! Four colyums!" he chuckled, as they entered.

Hank turned with the cup to offer it to Betsy.

"By jinks, Betsy's gone," said Hank. "That's what we git fer tryin' to be so polite!"

"Mebbe some guy rustled her off," said Bill. "But I don't give a dug-gun; I know whar the cake is settin' an' I'm a-goin' to steal it right now. By jinks, Hank it's made of real apricots! I seen Betsy make it. Come on, an' we'll have some by ourselves—half a cake apiece; with frost on it a half-inch thick —a three-layer one, too! Come on."

"You shore nobody's guardin' it?" Hank questioned.

"What do we kere? Say, which do you like the best: āpricots or ăpricots? I think I like āpricots the best!"

"Go on!" grinned Hank, poking Bill in the side.

"I seen a lovely pie, too," said Bill.

"We'll git lynched, if we git caught!" Hank warned.

"We won't git caught. Come on. The 'frolicers' are goin' to dance ag'in. By jinks! I forgot: I've got this next dance with Mrs. Swale. Say, Hank, you git the cake, while we're unsuspiciously dancin' aroun', an' you guard it jealously till I join you in the stable. We'll have a feast!" Bill exclaimed, walking toward the hall.

"I'm goin' to take the risk, an' you're to git the goods. Not much! I'd rather hold up the stage-coach—I'm shore I'd git off easier," said Hank, convincingly.

"Kain't you find a partner, 'Kansas'?" one at the door asked.

"We're a-goin' to set the nex' one out," Hank replied. He went in and took a seat near the musicians.

"Let's play some games after the dance," suggested Red Nose Bill. "I'm tired of dancin'. Let's play post-office."

"Post-office!" exclaimed the ones within hearing.

"It's a jolly good game," Red Nose Bill grinned. "More fun than huggin', anyway. You go into a dark room an' call for a letter or somethin'. When a gal comes in you jus' grab her an'—"

"I know how to play it," someone interrupted, "but it's only a kid's game."

"So's dancin'," said Bill.

"Dancin' ain't a kid's game," the ladies said in chorus.

"Youse go hoppin' aroun' over the floor like a jack-rabbit," Bill continued. "If that ain't a kid's game I don't know what is. An' it's a regular huggin' match, too!"

Some of the ladies indignantly drew their partners away.

"Any man that calls dancin' a kid's game or a huggin' match is a little off in his upper story," said a little damsel, indignantly. "An' you're jus' crazy because you can't dance yourself!"

"Kain't I? I kin dance as good as anybudy.

I learned to dance to the tune of a six-shooter," Bill grinned, walking away.

The fiddles began to play "Home, Sweet Home," and the couples began to glide around the floor.

As one of the couples whirled merrily toward the door, the lady happened to espy a small piece of paper sticking from under it. She called attention to it and her partner picked it up—to drop it again with an exclamation. At once a few couples stopped to ascertain the cause, and the congregation soon attracted others.

They learned that it was a note signed by Cap'n Kidd. At once the dance broke up.

"Mebbe it's only a joke," someone remarked.

"A joke! Look at the signature—it's genuine!"

"More colyums!" grinned the editor.

"You bet!" exclaimed Hank. "But it'll be the kind wearin' blue coats an' brass buttons this time!"

The editor nodded apprehensively, and began jotting down his notes.

Someone located Jack Morris and brought him to the mess-house. When he had carefully examined the paper, he glanced up at the excited faces and said quietly: "It's genuine! It's Cap'n Kidd's signature!"

With smothered "Ohs!" the listeners fearfully glanced around as if expecting to encounter the mysterious outlaw.

Long after the guests had departed, and rest had settled over the ranch, Jack paced uneasily before the mess-house.

"So the Cap'n's tryin' to make a fool of me again!" he exclaimed furiously as he stumbled away, and wearily bent his steps toward the bunk-house.

CHAPTER XII

THE KID

HARRY WESTERN, from all outward appearance, was a slender youth, standing not over five feet three in high-heeled riding boots. The big, broad-brimmed Stetson sat gracefully upon long, brown curls which hung to the shoulders, shading a pair of bright, but shy, brown eyes. A big, red silk handkerchief was looped loosely about a well-rounded neck. The face was tanned and very smooth; the hands were small; there was something girlish in his entire make-up, and he was occasionally called "Maggie" by some of the jealous hands whoperceived that "the Kid" was given more privileges than they. When the foreman happened to hear satirical remarks about "the perty boy" he would say, "Harry is only reserved." And though he was retiring and very seldom associated with the other ranch hands, a complaisant one was he. The case being, in truth, that he treated his fellow-workmen with worthy estimation and they could not openly act their gratification. But their time came: Harry was to go with the band of cattle on the drive. "The Kid's too stuck up over his handsomeness," said Green; "he won't dirty his perty leetle han's. At firs' I thought he was *Billy the Kid,** in disguise! Haw! haw! haw! haw!"

"Did you ever notice how he looks at a feller with his big, brown eyes when he hears him cuss?" asked one, disdainfully.

"Looks like he's a-goin' to cry!" Green sneered. "Say, did you ever happen to see him laugh?"

"He don't never laugh," a third replied.

"Wait till he's got to pull a few cows out of the mud," said Red Nose Bill.

"An' drinks out of a waterhole," said the third.

"I'll bet he'll wish he was back here playin' with his twins," said Green.

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* NOTE: Billy the Kid, a notorious outlaw of the Southwest, who was finally killed by Sheriff Pat Garrett, was accused of taking twenty-three lives when he himself was at the ripe age of twenty-three. Then his ignominious end came. He and his gang would suddenly come upon some unsuspecting Mexican sheep herder and shoot him down in cold blood "just to watch him kick!" Thus, Green's intimation was readily understood when he sarcastically applied the title to the peace-loving Harry Western. He believed the comparison would show Harry up in the light of a "faint heart."

"Twins?" the first exclaimed. "Has he got twins?"

"Whar you be'n?" Green inquired. "Shore, he's got twins, an' he's gone locoed over 'em!"

"Didn't know he knew enough to git merried," grinned the other.

"You're right thar," said Green. "But he's got four-legged twins."

"Four-legged twins! You don't tell me!"

"Calves."

"Calves?"

"Bet yer life! The boss give 'em to him an' he spends all his extra time playin' with 'em!"

"An' he's goin' with us on the drive?" protested Red Nose Bill.

"He's a-goin' to start out with us anyway. An' mebbe you won't believe me—he's goin' to have a special camp wagon all by himself."

"You don't say so! Well, well, who is he, anyway?" the others sneered.

"Why don't you be a friend of the boss, too? I'm a-goin' to reciprocate," Green declared.

"Don't do it, Green," said one; "you're not perty enough! You've got to give back fer what you receive. Yer proportions are not in harmony with yer desire. Besides, you wouldn't fondle a calf like 'Maggie' kin —yer han's are not mates! As fer handlin' the boss, you're not delicate enough. Furthermore, yer confidence is against you. An' as I have said—"

The supper bell rang.

At the table one of the boys asked, "Wonder if the Kid's through milkin' his calves?"

"Not him," another replied. " His han's are too stuck up; don't ketch him a-milkin'. He don't believe in reciprocity, like Green does."

"What's that?" said Green, hearing his name mentioned.

"I was jus' sayin', you'd better go out an' help the Kid milk his twins."

"We'll take turns. He's a-goin' to tie 'em on the back of his cook wagon, an' we'll have fresh milk on the drive!" Green sneered.

Then he recited:

" 'But, say, have you rid acrost the plains
When the noon sun was pourin' down
Like fire? Have you? If not, you kain't
Appreciate the 'waterhole.'
Why, pard, it's worth a gold mine!
This greenish bit of boilin' pond
Of rotten water full of bones!
It's water, though, an' we are glad!' "

"You must have learned that from Shakespeare Bill," said Hank. "His poetry wasn't so bad; but he shore was!"

The Kid entered.

"How's yore nursery gittin' on, 'Maggie'?" Green taunted.

Harry ignored the sarcastic remark, and sat at a vacant place at the table.

"Say, Green," said Hank, "will you pass the 'spuds' down this way?"

"Why, shore," said Green, passing the potatoes. "Say, Hank, I savvy you're not a-goin' to do the cookin' this drive."

"Nope," said Hank, "I've got a predecessor."

" 'Maggie?' " Green slurred.

"Shore," Hank answered. "But I ain't responsible fer his cookin', though I'm perfectly willin' to trust his viridescent efforts."

"I have made coffee," Harry declared.

"Didn't burn the water?" Hank asked, jokingly.

"It went up into steam!" Harry answered.

"I'll bet the outfit changed its cook right then!" insinuated Green.

"But this outfit won't, Green," said Harry, simply; and his quiet tone shut Green up for the rest of the meal.

After supper Ed Maxwell said to his sister: "Say, but you're lookin' perty this evening. Is Harry comin' over?"

"How do I know?" May asked, innocently.

"Why, I jus' thought he might come over an' say good-bye afore goin' on the drive—that's all. Ha! 'Speak of the devil an' he's shore to appear!' Guess I'd better git out of here: 'two's a company, an' three's a crowd,' you know."

"You can't tease," May smiled, as she opened the door in answer to a knock.

"Good evenin'," said Harry, modestly.

"Good evening," said May. "Come right in."

"Hello, Kid," Ed greeted. "Have a chair."

"How're the twins getting along?" May inquired.

"Fine an' dandy!" Harry replied. "They're lively as jack rabbits. You must come an' see 'em some time." He dropped his eyes, shyly.

"Speakin' of calves," said Ed; "I heard that Green objects to you as drive cook, Kid."

"He hasn't tasted my apple pies," Harry replied, evasively.

Ed pulled the end of his moustache. He admired the Kid for not "squealing."

"Hank says," remarked May, " 'that feller

Green takes to bullyin' jus' like a chicken takes to the shade in summer.' "

"Hank's right," said Ed. "That Green's always raisin' cain!" and he went out.

An hour later when Harry returned to the mess-house, Green accosted him: "Say, Kid, whatcher mean by tellin' on me?"

"Tellin' on you?" Harry repeated.

"Say, youse tol' the boss I'd be'n usin' you shameful. Whatcher got to say?"

Harry drew himself up like a little bantam rooster, and his voice shook with anger as he answered: "This is what I've got to say —you're a coward an' a bully!"

"You're a liar!" screamed Green.

There was a dead silence, in which Green glared into Harry's resolute eyes. Then a voice commanded: "Step back thar, Green!"

Green's right arm slowly, reluctantly, lowered to his side and he stepped back as Jack Morris came out from behind the corner of the mess-house. Green stood, crouching like a whipped cur.

The ranch hands began to collect around the group and questions were put as to the cause of the trouble. The "whipped dog" took courage at the sight of a few of his friends. Rousing himself, he yelped lamely.

Jack pointed toward the road, saying: "Git out of here."

"Let him stay," Harry interceded.

A few hours later Jack met Harry at the pump.

"Kid," said he, "my sister shore thinks you're it: the way you stuck up fer Green—"

"Did you tell her?" Harry rebuked.

"She saw you as we drove up to the house from the depot, an' wanted to know who that perty boy was. I out an' tol' her. She wants to meet you now. She'll be here fer quite a spell—jus' from Frisco. Come on, Kid, an' git 'a knock-down', She shore thinks you're it!"

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE DRIVE

ED MAXWELL ordered a thousand head of cattle to be delivered at Raton. It required skill and judgment to handle this herd, and Jack Morris was made drive boss. The first day the herders were kept busy keeping the cattle from breaking out and returning to their old feeding grounds. After pushing them and tiring them so that they would lie down and rest at night, they became accustomed to the drive, and gave less trouble. Each cowpuncher knew his duties, and each day was about the same. They guided the great herd by riding along its edge, and if it turned, they rode at the leaders and drove them in the direction desired. In the rear some of the boys kept the stragglers up. A mid-day sun poured its hot rays upon the plains and the heat arose from the burning soil into parched faces and gritty throats; the herd made the dust fly in a choking cloud. All were very thirsty. "Oh, for a waterhole!"

"Say, Jack, you ain't seen the cook, have ye?" asked Hank.

"No cook," Jack replied. "He'd be mighty welcome." And he replaced the big handkerchief over his mouth to keep out the dust.

"Say, Jack, wouldn't you like to have a juicy steak" Hank tantalized, "or a nice drink of cool spring water?"

Jack wiped the dust which had settled about his mouth, but remained silent. Hank seemed to be enjoying the misery and chuckled.

After a few more long hours of thirst and hunger, they brought the dusty herd to the Cimarron, a name given to the Canadian River in the northern part of New Mexico. The cattle were wild for water and in the rush some of the weaker were pushed back by the stronger. Worse yet, some of the herd had been pushed into deep water, and there they began "milling," swimming round and round as in a whirlpool, helpless, and likely to drown in numbers. There was no time to think of danger, but into the tossing horns the men swam their horses and with shouts and ropes endeavored to head the crazed cattle toward the shore. All was a blinding confusion! At last the "mill" was broken, and tired as the horses were, worn out and starved as the men were, they had to pull out of the mud with ropes the sinking animals.

The cattle huddled on the bank. They were too exhausted to give any more trouble for a time, and they cropped the short grass, or sank to rest as they pleased. The men unsaddled their trembling bronchos, and they, too, were allowed to go free. After a "snatch of grub" the men threw themselves upon the hot ground, used their wet saddles for pillows and slept. When they awoke to stand their turn at herding, they saw the campfire casting its circle of light not far away, and they arose stiff and sore and stretched their aching limbs and yawned.

At daybreak they ate the rude fare, drank the hot coffee and before the sun was up each man had saddled a fresh horse and was helping to push the herd along the river.

Thus they arrived at Raton in about a week, and every one of them was not sorry to see the last of the herd.

Is it any wonder that the boys went wild that night upon reaching town? After some hard months upon the range they were starved for society and "blowed in every cent fer a good time." Like the ship-wrecked sailor stuffs himself when food is put in quantity before him, the boys spend their hard-earned wages in a night, indulging their ravenous appetites to excess. Raton was an important center of the cattle industry and headquarters of the Maxwell Land Grant and Cattle Company. The saloon was the only house for amusement and the boys dropped in to watch a game of cards. They drank whiskey and played; drank more and lost more money; played more recklessly; drank more whiskey; and at last returned to camp "dead broke."

Harry Western, the cook, rode out on the old Santa Fe Trail. Its history was one of the most tragic and bloody episodes of the West. Kansas was familiarly known as the Grazing State, and its trade in the early days with the Southwest engaged many men and wagons. The old trail ran along the Arkansas River, through Colorado by way of the Raton Pass into New Mexico. A military post was established at Leavenworth, Kansas, to protect the freighters and cattlemen, and strong escorts of cavalry accompanied the overland wagon-trains to repel the attacks of Indians. Yet fearful ambuscades and massacres were a daily occurrence, making a line of blood many hundred miles across the plains that made the scenes Harry had witnessed and taken part in, seem but a sham as he compared them with the terrible battles of the Old Santa Fe Trail.

"Hello, Kid," said Hank, "whar in the deuce have you be'n?"

"Enjoying the scenery on the old Santa Fē Trail."

"Humph! Scenery ain't very startlin', is it?"

"Not of a very tremendous type," Harry answered; "but full of incident."

"You're right. Say, did I ever tell you of the time we had comin' up from Kansas? Wall, me an' Jack—"

"'Lend me your ears,'" said Buck Tooth Hanson, turning to go. "With apologies to Hank, Mack, let's move; he's a-goin' to give us one of 'is yarns ag'in."

"Wall, Buck Tooth," Hank grinned, "this one's 'bout a gal."

"Oh!" the other ejaculated, "that's different."

The boys lounged around the fire. Everyone appeared to think that all his troubles were ended, and the camp took on an assumed air of idleness.

They enjoyed the rest after that hard drive, and smoked now in contentment and comfort. Hank lay upon his back, gazing at the stars. Suddenly he sat up. "Any you fellers ever git throwed down by a gal?" They looked at each other, and grinned. "If any of you have, you'll appreciate what I'm a-goin' to tell you." He knocked the ashes from his pipe upon the high heel of his boot. "It was 'way back in Kansas it happened, an' that's why I'm in New Mexico," he continued.

"You kain't seem to git over that sparkin', Hank,' said Buck Tooth.

"Shore," said Hank. "Set down an' listen. Well, I asked the gal to merry me, like all men do, if they git the chanct, an' she threw me down—"

"Like all women do if they git the chanct?" one broke in, questioningly.

"Wall," Hank said, "mebbe it was my fault this time. I was so blamed bashful! But you kin bet I've long since recuperated. Women don't any more scare me now than a yearling, or a full-grown cow when I'm on my bronc. When I was a beginner, I mus' have got a leetle mixed.

"One night I went to call on Betsy, an' after

I'd worked up to the pitch, I says: 'I don't know what's the matter with me lately, kain't eat, I kain't sleep, kain't do nothin'; kain't even keep my eyes off of you!'

" 'Oh, shucks,' she grunts in the mos' disgusted way, an' moves away on the sofee.

"I edges up a leetle nearer an' says: 'Betsy, if I should ask—if you should ask—if I—if you—if we should ask—I mean, if us—oh, durn it! if we should ask you to be my ol' woman—I mean, I don't mean what I say—I say, I don't mean what I mean—I mean—I say!'

"I pulled myself together by a mighty effort, an' says I: 'Betsy, when I come back from the round-up, will I—kin I take you fishin'?'

" 'Oh, Hank,' says she, 'I love to fish!'

" 'Ever ketch a sucker?' I says.

" 'What do you mean?' she demands, indignant-like.

" 'I mean, Betsy, will you merry me?'

" 'Huh!' she snaps, 'think I'd merry a fool?'

" 'Think I'd merry a woman?' I sneered, gittin' up on my dignity! But that's all the further I could git that time. When I comes back from the roun'-up, I fin's my perty bird had vamosed fer New Mexico, not leavin' any explanation behind fer me.

"'This is edifyin',' says I to myself. 'An' I'll learn her a thing or two!' So one day me an' Jack—"

"Why's he workin' on the same ranch with Betsy fer?" Buck Tooth asked, with a wink.

"B'gosh!" Hank exclaimed; "does look kinder like a put-up job. But," he resumed with a grin, "hostilities ain't be'n settled a-tween us yet: Betsy's still on the warpath. She's the most animositiest critter I ever seen! Mebbe some day we'll smoke the pipe o' peace."

Hank arose. "I'm a-goin' to town an' bring out some apples here an' make a pie!" he announced.

"Ow-wow!" the boys yelled, jumping up. "Apple pies! Apple pies! Ow—wow! Homemade! Wow!"

There was great commotion and confusion. Some of the boys were slapping Hank on the back with their sombreros. Others saddled their bronchos. They rode to town with Hank. Presently they returned with the apples, and Hank finally completed a pie. Everyone became impatient; it seemed to require a very long time to bake in the ill-constructed oven!

"Hey, 'Kansas'," said another, "pile on some more chips; that fire wouldn't scorch a ha'r, let alone roast a pie!"

"Youse fellers," said Hank, "will spoil it if you git too highfalutin'."

The oven fell over!

"I tol' you so. Who done it?" Hank stormed. "Wall, somebudy's a-goin' to git hurt! I'm not a-goin' to have nobudy ruin my reputation. If this pie's spoilt, I'm the one that'll suffer!"

"It depen's on who eats it, 'Kansas'," they grinned in chorus.

"I'm not askin' you to eat it, anyways! I'm not afraid of my own cookin', an', b'gosh! I'll eat the pie, if—"

"Not by a blamed sight!" they yelled. "Not by a blamed sight!"

"Wall, fellers," said Hank, drawing himself up, "if everyone of you don't git away from here an' quit botherin' me, I'll jus' natcherally let the pie go to the devil!"

" 'Tis in a perty warm place jus' now!" said Buck Tooth, walking away.

After many complications the pie was taken from the oven.

"How'll we divide it?" Hank smiled, examining his art with great satisfaction.

"I'll show you," said Jack, placing his finger upon the coveted treasure: "This is the way!" He grabbed the pie and sprang toward his horse. Before they recovered from their cruel surprise, he was galloping toward town with triumphant yells! There was a hurried mounting and an eager pursuit. They dashed down the main street, yelling, spurring, and firing their big six-shooters into the air. People scrambled, fell, and scattered for shelter. It was exciting when the cowboys came to town!

CHAPTER XIV

THE RIVALS

JACK beat them back to camp. They arrived hot on his trail, jumped from their sweaty ponies, and ran to where he sat, cutting the pie into pieces. They squatted around the campfire and he gave everyone a piece.

"Say, 'Kansas'," said one, with his mouth full of pie, "how did youse happen to stick to Betsy's trail?"

"Well," said Hank, licking his fingers, "I did perty well, until the Injuns got after me."

"Injuns?" Mack inquired.

"An' then I done better. Say, that pie warn't half bad, was it?" Hank asked with great satisfaction.

"Did the Injuns scare ye, 'Kansas'?" Mack questioned.

"Not till we run out of ammunition."

"Then what happened?" Mack grinned.

"Well," said Hank, "after we'd run out of ammunition, an' was 'bout to give up, the United

States Cavalry came to our rescue, an' we was mighty thankful! Say, this here pie—"

"That wasn't half a fight," said Mack. "You'd ought to have seen—"

"You'd have thought so," said Hank, "if you'd be'n thar. Injuns everywhar!"

"How many did you kill?" questioned Buck Tooth.

" 'Bout 'nough to make feather dusters fer the hull country! They've be'n makin' dusters from the red devils' plumage I killed ever since!"

"You mean feather-beds!" said Mack, sarcastically.

"Not so, ye idiots!" said Buck Tooth. "Hank was tellin' us 'bout his job he had with a Wild West Show!"

"Guess I'll hit my blanket," Hank yawned. He went to his broncho, took off the heavy saddle and bridle, and hobbled the beast. The others followed his example, and the camp was soon asleep —*dreaming of apple pies!*

The next morning before the sun was barely up, the outfit started on the homeward journey. Jack rode beside Harry on the cook wagon, and Hank joined them.

"Say, what ailed you last night, old man in yore sleep?" Jack questioned. "You put yore arm 'round my neck, sayin', 'Yes, Betsy, I'll be good to you!' "

"Oh, that's what apple pie done!" Hank blushed. "Apples do make you dream, don't they?"

"You're so foxy, wonder you don't catch Apache Kidd!" Jack insinuated.

"We did come mighty clost to ketchin' him the time we come from Kansas on the Santee Fee Trail," Hank declared. "You remember, Jack?"

Jack nodded.

"Then you really had a fight?" Harry asked.

"Bet yore life!" Hank exclaimed.

"I thought you were only prevaricatin' last night with the boys and they were makin' fun of you."

"Kain't hardly blame 'em, I've given 'em some perty big variations. But this is a true lie of our fight on the Ol' Santee Fee Trail 'bout seven years ago: Me an' Jack was rustlin' some chips fer the fire one evenin'. We had be'n pushin' fer Bent's Fort as fas' as our jackasses could travel. We hadn't seen an Injun fer a day or so, an' when you kain't see 'em you kin bet yore las' dollar they're up to some devilment! Frank

Smith tol' us not to go fir, but we was only kids, an' warn't afeared of Injuns!"

"Bent's Fort is in Colorado, isn't it?" Harry asked.

"Shore. Mighty hard place 'roun' thar," Hank replied. "It was in the center of a big buffalo range, an' the Injuns used to attack the ol' fort; but they never got it! It was full of reckless Injun traders an' Injun fighters, an' Bent was thar leader. He was the firs' American Governor of New Mexico, by the way. The fort became a popular place as emigration increased. The troops camped thar an' often got guides. As we didn't like the looks of things we wanted to git under the protection of the ol' fort, but we couldn't make it, so we camped. As I said, me an' Jack was rustlin' chips fer the fire. We both on us had got a good big hatful and was ridin' back to camp, when we heard a shot an' my bronc fell under me.

" 'Climb up behin' me, quick,' says Jack.

" 'Perty heavy load fer one horse,' says I; 'but we'll try it!'

"He put the spurs to his hoss an' 'way we went. We didn't git fer from the river when his hoss was shot dead from under us.

"'By jinks!' says I, 'this is gittin' to be perty serious!'

"'Lay down behin' the hoss,' says Jack, workin' hard to git his Winchester from its saddle holster, which was pinned under the bronch.

"A bullet zipped passed me an' you kin bet I wasted no time lookin' fer the nex' one. I laid on my face, an' jerked out my six-shooters. Jack had got his Winchester out an' he drew bead. Then I saw a feller up in a tree who had be'n pickin' off our hosses as nice as you please! Jack let fly at him an' then there came a loud yell! A band of Injuns jumped out from some bushes, whoopin' like mad!

"'Guess it's Apache Kidd,' says Jack, aimin' carefully. He fired an' the Kidd dropped from the tree. But, as we know, he's still alive; I guess Jack didn't kill him that time! In fact, I'm willin' to swear that Cap'n Kidd is bullet-proof! By jinks! I know of a feller who rode up behin' him, shot him in the back, an' even then Apache Kidd turned an' killed the feller on the spot, an' got away! I dunno, he shore is a devil! Hope somebody will git him perty soon."

"How did you manage to escape?" Harry persisted.

"We hel' the Injuns off till dark, an' then crawled to camp on our han's an' knees. Frank Smith heerd the firin' an he had got the wagons ready fer a fight. The fire was out. We et col' grub that night, with our we'pons clost at han'. But the Injuns didn't disturb us no more."

"I have heard that many of the white men had merried Indian women of that region, and adopted the dress and habits of the Indians, and sometimes became chiefs in the tribes. From whom sprang half-breeds —very dangerous men —in whom was bred the courage of the white man and the crafty, treacherous spirit of the red man," said Harry.

"That's Apache Kidd! Them's the kind you want to watch out fer—Dang you, Satan!" he exclaimed, hitting the lazy horse with the quirt, "wonder you wouldn't eat at the right time." "Satan" jerked up his head and tossed it up and down as he started forward. Hank chuckled: "He knows he's a-goin' wrong. A hoss knows perty near as much as a man—mebbe more in some things."

There was a pause.

"It seems to me," Harry ventured, "someone ought to be able to capture Apache Kidd."

"Wall, you jus' try it, Kid, fer luck! We've had our fun at it. Besides, thar's that five thousand dollar inducement, you know," said Hank.

Hank's tone gave Harry to understand that it was almost useless to try, but he asked: "You haven't given up hope?"

"No—oh, no—not exactly! Every dog has his day' an' Kidd will have his'n! It ain't much use to go after him, especially; but if you jus' happen to run acrost him, try yore luck, an' luck be with you, Kid!"

After a short pause Harry asked: "Have you ever been in Arizona?"

"Bet yore life! Chased Apache Kidd all over the Grand Canyon an' the Cliff Dwellings an' the Painted Desert, from Tombstone to Yuma, an'—"

"That's where it's so hot that the hens lay strangled eggs, isn't it?" Harry queried, with a smile.

"Bet yore life! It's hot 'nough to burn the hoofs off'n yore bronc. That's the reason I had to give up the chase!" Hank grinned.

"You're a good-natured one!" Harry expostulated.

"Ain't I? Kain't blame the boys, kin you?

Almos' believe 'em myself, sometimes," and Hank's grin broadened.

"No wonder Betsy fled from Kansas!"

"By jinks, that's right! I'll swear off when I git merried."

"Better start now. You might believe you're married —if you don't," Jack inferred.

"Won't she be glad to see you?" Hank grinned at Jack suggestively.

" 'She'?" Jack repeated, with a puzzled air.

"Why, you know: May Maxwell—shore! Think I don't know?"

After a short silence, Jack asked: "Have you ever noticed an ol, rooster keepin' one eye on the ground, lookin' fer feed fer his hens, an' his other eye watchin' the sky?"

"Oh, yes!" Harry exclaimed; "he's looking for hawks."

"So am I,"Jack said. "I'm always lookin' fer hawks. But even if I am, now an' then one will git into the chicken yard in spite—"

"Of the ol, rooster," Hank interrupted with a slight grin.

Jack smiled: "Not an ol, rooster, Hank, but a young one! It takes more than twenty-eight years of experience to ketch Cap'n Kidd!" And he sighed helplessly.

"But he's fooled the old roosters, too," Harry said, trying to encourage his friend, whose one desire was to capture that clever outlaw of the great Southwest.

"That's right," Jack readily agreed, and he smiled a little. "Yes, in spite of the roosters the hawks git in. This makes us feel bad, an' next time we watch sharper. Of course, you are excusable under the circumstances, but I haven't a sweetheart to turn my head. You see, Kid, it's when the ol, rooster is courtin' his gal, the hawks swoop down!" This was said in a manner to insinuate that Harry was "cutting out" the speaker.

"Now, now, Jack," Harry smiled; "you do me great injustice! Besides I wouldn't know a hawk from a buzzard. It's all right for you to crow over a poor tenderfoot."

"Takin' Miss Maxwell in the deal," Jack replied, "reckon I'm the tenderfoot, Kid!"

"I don't know about that, Jack." Harry smiled. "Miss Maxwell thinks that the West is well up in the art of love-making—and a certain individual in particular!"

Jack turned upon Hank: "Wait until Betsy hears of that!"

"But I don't happen to be the 'certain individual in particular'," Hank declared. "You happen to be *it*, Jack."

"Me? Git out! That apple pie has made you plumb loco! Why, I ain't got no more show than the man in the moon!"

"Have any of us, Jack?" Harry smiled. "There must be the one back East, at college."

"You think so!" gasped Jack and Hank in one breath.

"No doubt. Pretty girls always do," Harry explained.

"Kain't we make her fergit the States?" suggested Hank.

"Perhaps, for a time," smiled Harry.

"Thar's some hope in that," said Jack. "At least, fer a time."

"Boys," declared Hank, "we've gotter make the most of it. What's the matter 'bout takin' turns? We orter go at it right. Be *mee*thodical in our courtin'."

Harry pulled up the team of bronchos: "Hank," said he, "do you want to turn her head? She'd be so blamed stuck up—why, the idea! Don't you know that woman glories in bringing man to his knees, you old tenderfoot? Why, if we three courted Miss Maxwell at the same time, she'd be so stuck up she wouldn't look at one of us!"

"You don't say so!" Hank remonstrated, meekly.

"Kin savvy, Hank?" said Jack. "The Kid's an ole hand at the game!"

"An' me an' you, Jack, had better practice up a bit! We ain't got no show with him; he'll skin us alive, shore," Hank declared.

"It's well, then," laughed Harry, "that I know my advantage!"

CHAPTER XV

IN THE STATE OF CORRUPTION

LOUISE BROSSEAU, being an unfortunate child, at the age of two lost her mother. Her father became discouraged at this great loss, grew despondent and took to drinking. Louise was taken care of by her grandparents.

Madam Rose Myrile, a dainty little French woman, conducted a respectable boarding-house, which Francis Brosseau—Louise's father—patronized when in Maxwell City. A feeling of friendship sprang up between them, and oftentimes she, when not too busy, would sit and talk with him while he was eating his meals. At the age of fourteen, Rose Myrile, the only daughter of a wealthy family, had been compelled to marry a titled man of France whom she abhorred. As she could not tolerate living with a man whom she did not love, she quietly ran away to America. Self-dependent, she started the little boarding-house, which was very successful. Many a cowman rode miles out of his way to get a "square meal" at the popular road-house, and have the chance of a little chat with the polite little proprietress, whom they found always agreeable and pleasant. Francis Brosseau was tall, broad-shouldered, and very dark, yet his handsome face showed traces of sorrow, which the little, striking blond often noticed, and her sympathetic nature moved her to a more friendly and confidential relation than she had realized. Each day she would look forward to his coming; while he, on the other hand, felt disappointed if business kept him from town.

He lost interest in his ranch, sold it, and went into business in town, boarding at Madam Myrile's, called by the cattlemen: "The Cowboys' Home."

When Francis would not return to the "Home" after a day's work, Madam Myrile knew the cause and just where to find him. Whenever on a spree, having too much respect and love for the Madam, he would not return to her till sober again, but stayed with his parents. He was not surprised at any time to hear her voice calling to him from the door; she was never admitted into the house, his folks blaming him because he lived at the "Home" and made her his common law wife.

Thus she now stood, calling. His mother rushed out and tried to drive her away, and Francis staggered out.

"Francis!" the Madam cried. "Oh, Francis, come home!"

He, always yielding to her pleadings, went back with her. They were true lovers in every sense of the word. He was able to provide for her and gave her everything she desired; but he was not able to stop drinking.

"Francis, why you no marry me legally, and take your Louise to live with us? We should be very much happier," she implored.

"I am going to marry you, Rose, dear. Then you will be the mother you long to be to my little girl," Francis replied, with a kiss.

But the stronger-minded brother had a great influence over Francis, especially when not sober, and whenever the subject of marrying was approached, he would always say to Francis: "What's the use of marrying her, so long as you have lived with her so many years?" So Francis kept putting it off, and putting it off, with the promise to her that before long they would stand before a minister and take the marriage vows. But it was put off just once too often: he was killed in a runaway, and Rose, being self-dependent, went back again to the boarding-house. The old familiar faces began to appear once more.

While her father was living, Louise was well taken care of by her grandparents, but after his death there came a sudden change. Louise's mother had left two thousand dollars, in a note, in her father's care. After his death the little Madam put the note in Colonel Maxwell's hands, because the grandparents tried to get it. Louise was forbidden to tell the whereabouts of the note, and by keeping the secret, she was treated shamefully. Often she was dragged from her bed and given a severe beating. She was not allowed to see Rose and seldom did see anyone who spoke a kind word to her. But there was one who braved the old Brosseau threats and, in spite of all, would see Louise. This was Ernest Moore, a man of about twenty, who worked at a neighboring ranch. He and Louise were very fond of each other since the first meeting, and he often made serious promises to her. After her father died, these happy lovers were forbidden by the grandparents to keep company, because the niggardly old folks knew that if their grandchild married, they would lose the money.

May Maxwell, an old friend of Louise's, incurred the ill-will of the Brosseau family because she protected Louise. Louise would steal over to the Maxwell ranch to unburden her breaking heart and receive consolation.

"Remember, Louise," May Maxwell would say, "they're your grandparents and guardians, and as long as you live under their roof you must do as they say. But always try to be a Christian and you'll come out victorious!"

The Brosseaus observed that Louise generally came away from the Maxwell's in better spirits, so they began to suspect that they had something to do with the concealment of the note, and prohibited her going there.

Ernest was determined that his sweetheart should not be abused any longer, and tried to get the consent of her guardians to their marriage. He was refused, unless she gave up the note, which she absolutely would not do, and they threatened to put her in a reformatory to prevent her marrying quietly as long as she was under age.

One night May Maxwell's den door opened, and in rushed Louise, weak, exhausted, and almost fainting.

"May! May! they've come with a wagon to take me away! Can't you protect me? Do something for me? Oh, help me! Where can I go! Hide me, hide me quickly!" she cried.

A loud knock sounded upon the door. Both of the women started. The door opened, in sprang Ernest Moore, caught Louise in his arms and disappeared in the darkness without.

Meanwhile, the sheriff and his deputies searched Brosseau's house from top to bottom, in every nook and corner; not finding the girl anywhere, Mrs. Brosseau, growing suspicious that the Maxwells had hidden the child, told the sheriff to inquire there. Barely had Ernest and Louise fled, when loud knocks were heard at the Maxwells' door. They had been too quick for the sheriff, for all doors were barred, lights extinguished and everything lifeless. Of course, he naturally suspected that the girl was protected there, yet he did not dare to break in and so remained all night guarding the house to keep anyone from passing in or out. The Maxwells amusedly watched them from the darkened rooms, and they smiled when they thought of how the two lovers were making their escape in the meantime.

The fugitives crawled on their hands and knees over snake and gopher holes for some hundred yards, stopping now and then to listen and rest. The hard ground bruised them severely; their clothes were badly torn as they crept under fences and the shrubbery which they could not avoid in the darkness, scratching their faces and hands until they bled. But all this was not heeded as much as the fear of being overtaken at any moment.

Next morning the Colonel went out and smiled to himself as he walked quietly by the sheriff, who was asleep near the door. The officer awoke in due time and politely asked permission to search the house.

"Certainly," said May Maxwell. "Now, be sure and look everywhere—especially among my clothes, as Louise is only a tiny girl, and it would be an easy matter for her to hide in one of my skirts! But one thing let me tell you: remember that you have a little daughter, and how she is protected. So don't be harsh with this child, who has not even a mother."

Later the Colonel found his daughter at her study table, her elbow resting upon it, and her head supported in her hand, as her vacant eyes fell on a letter lying before her. Then her head sank lower and lower as she burst into tears! "Well, well," said the Colonel, "what is it, Daughter?"

"Oh, read this, Father!" she exclaimed, holding out the letter to him.

His face grew dark as he read the unprintable lines of a defamatory letter, which was not signed.

"A blackmailer!" he exclaimed. "I'll see Jack an' mebbe he kin trace—"

"Father, don't let him see the letter!" the daughter exclaimed.

The Colonel hastened out. He found Jack in the bunk-house and told him about the letter.

"Got the envelope, Colonel?"

"Yes," said the Colonel. He handed it to Jack.

"The post-office stamp says this was mailed yesterday in town. That's all we know at present," said Jack. "You said the object seems to be to git you to pay money to stop it. If that's the case, more letters will follow. In the meantime, we must keep our eyes open. Of course, we easily suspect the Brosseaus, but we've got no proof, Colonel, an' until we git some evidence we kain't do much. The bes' thing we kin do is to ketch the one puttin' the letter into the mailbox."

"That's right. You watch Brosseau's house, an' when anyone leaves it, follow him. We'll teach the blackmailers a thing or two! They won't stay here long."

"Kin I have Hank to help me?"

"Certainly, certainly! Anyone you wish."

The Colonel called at the Brosseau ranch. "Is Mr. Brosseau in?" he asked.

"No," said Mrs. Brosseau. "What kin I do for you?"

"What's all this trouble about?" the Colonel demanded.

"What trouble?" Mrs. Brosseau inquired, innocently.

The Colonel stepped close to her, and said, "I jus' warn you—don't use the United States mails!"

"How you dare accuse me writing dos letters!" snapped the irritated woman.

The Colonel glanced at her with a wise expression, as much as to say, "How do you happen to know about the letters?"

"I'm not accusin' you; I'm only warnin' you," he answered insinuatingly.

Old man Brosseau called at the Maxwell City Bank to see the Colonel. "Well?" he said, curtly.

"I van't Louise," Brosseau replied. "I'm her guardian."

"Guardian? Yes, and how fatherly you performed yore duties! The girl resents your treatment, sir."

"She's very ungrateful. Haven't I give her a home ever since her poor mudder die?"

"Her father paid you well for her board. Now you're tryin' to git her note—all that she's got in the world. Because she won't tell you where it is, you—her guardian—want to put her into a reformatory for disobedience."

"Dey're both under age und I object!"

"It's not the age that you object to, but the note! It's safe enough, though!"

"You know where it iss?" Brosseau rose as he asked.

"You're askin' a personal question."

"Ve'll see vhat the law kin do 'bout makin' you geeve up my grandchild! I coome to-morrow wid the sheriff," said Brosseau, going out. He returned home unaware of Jack dogging his steps.

That night Jack found the Colonel's daughter in her little study reading "Hamlet." "What success?" she asked.

"Not any jus' yet. Ol' Brosseau told the Colonel that the sheriff would pay him a visit to-morrow to git the girl."

"Do you think the Frenchman will get her?"

"I don't know 'bout it nowadays! But I've known the time when the sheriff would not even dare to officiate in such a case, an' the Frenchman would have died with his boots on long ago! Times are different now. Mebbe the sheriff kin lawfully take the girl. If we kin prove that Brosseau wrote them letters, he won't have a ghost of a show!"

"Jack, you've read the letter!"

"It was my only clew."

After a short pause May remarked, "But, isn't the spelling awful! Just see how he spelled 'decent'."

" 'D-e-s-e-n-t'," spelled Jack, from the letter. "Well, how should it be spelled?"

" 'D-e-c-e-n-t'."

"An' 'd-e-s-e-n-t' doesn't mean the same thing?" An inspiration dilated Jack's eyes. "Then it's easy!" smiled he, and hurried out to join Hank, who was watching Brosseau's house.

"Anybody movin'?" Jack asked. "I'm goin' to have a talk with Mr. Brosseau, if I kin git past the bull-dog. We'll go together into the yard an' if Mr. Bull-dog gits too familiar, we'll do the bes' we kin an' let him off as easy as possible. Then I'll go into the house an' you peek through the windows. Oh, thar's the ol' lady jus' lettin' down the shade. We'll both go in. You remember the time we had in the rustler's cabin? Ol' Grizzly had us a-guessin', didn't he?"

"I shorely thought we was in fer it," said Hank. "Here comes Mister Bull-dog. Got any salt to throw on his tail?"

The dog came at them with savage snarls. Jack thrust out a stick at him and the brute fastened his fangs upon it with the tenacity of grip that when lifted into the air the unyielding, stubborn beast still held on, as it was swung bodily over Jack's head. There was a heavy thud and a sharp yelp. The bull-dog lay on the ground!

"Nobudy's got any business lettin' such a dog run loose," said Hank. "It serves the ol' man right! Say, won't he be mad!"

"Sh!" said Jack, "somebudy's comin' out!"

"Who's there?" Old Brosseau called.

"Come on, let's go," said Hank in a low whisper.

They hurried away with Brosseau almost on their heels. He stumbled over something, and they heard his angry curses.

"He's found his bull-dog," said Hank. "Glad he kain't git our range, or we'd shorely git a fusillade."

The next morning Brosseau rode over to the Maxwell ranch. "Iss the Colonel in?" he demanded, crossly.

"He's not in," replied Daisy, the housekeeper.

"Iss Jack Morris 'round?"

"Possibly you might find him in the bunkhouse. Good morning," she said, closing the door.

He walked toward his broncho with a deep scowl. When he knocked at the mess-house, Betsy opened the door.

"Iss the 'young detective' in?" he asked, sarcastically.

"The who?" Betsy questioned with a puzzled air.

"Jack Morris. Iss he in the house?"

"Yes. Would you like to see him?"

"I wouldn't ask if I no wanted to see him!" Brosseau snapped.

"Wall, mister, you kain't see him if you don't know yore manners! Oh, yes, to be shore, you're the feller who lives by blackmailin' hones' folks," accused Betsy, and she slammed the door in his face.

Presently Jack came out. He could barely keep a straight face because he surmised what was coming.

"You near my house last night?" sourly demanded the Frenchman.

Jack observed that Brosseau had been studying his tracks, and he replied with a quizzical smile: "Why, I believe I was. You didn't happen to fin' my knife around, did you?"

"Yes, an' I'm goin' to keep it for evidence for killing my thoroughbred bull-dog! Vhat you zay for yourself—eh!"

"You're right; he was a perty good bull-dog. Had lots of stick in him! Nex' time, ol' man, keep yore bull-dog chained an' he won't git into trouble."

"Who was wid you?"

"I jus' kain't remember." He turned innocently to Hank, who had joined them. "Do you know what fellers was away from the ranch las' night?"

"Why, let me see. Thar was me an' you—"

"You're the perpetrators! I'll have—"

"What's that?" Hank demanded. "No feller kin call me a name I kain't savvy. Say, give me a definition, you Frenchman!"

"Monsieur Brosseau," said Jack, "we came to pay you a visit, an' yore thoroughbred bull-dog seemed to object. I'm very sorry—"

"You'll pay me vone hundred dollars fer him, or—"

"We're not buying carcasses jus' now," said Jack. "Is that all you wish to see me 'bout?"

"Vhat you vant last night?" Brosseau asked, submissively.

"I wanted to see you 'bout yore grandchild."

"Vhat beeziness iss dot of yours?"

"I'm simply warnin' you, because when I've proven that you wrote them dirty letters, they will be sufficient to give you a taste of the 'pen.' If you'll still insist in exercisin' yore grandfatherly guardianship over yore grandchild, you'll wish you was back in gay Paree!"

"You fools dink I wrote letters of malicious sort. You've been circulating false reports of me, und I shall zue the Colonel and all of you for zlander!"

"You'd better start right away!" said Jack.

Arriving in town Jack and Hank found old Brosseau at the sheriff's office.

"What's all this trouble about, Jack?" the sheriff asked.

Jack gave an account of the situation.

"You suspect Mr. Brosseau?" the sheriff asked.

"Ask him to spell," Jack suggested.

"I no have to spell for you!" Brosseau said to Jack.

Jack turned quickly upon him. "Then you'll have to explain certain things afore a jury! An' mebbe that jury won't be as good a speller as you!"

"Come, come, Mr. Brosseau," said the sheriff; "shorely you won't object to such an easy matter. Why should you be afraid to spell?"

Jack gave him five or six words. Then he said, "Spell 'decent.' "

" 'D-e-s-e-n-t'," Brosseau spelled.

A triumphant smile crossed Jack's face, and he handed the sheriff the letter, saying: "He spelt that word the very same in this!"

"Vhat!" Brosseau raged, springing up.

"Wait a minute, Brosseau," said the sheriff. He read the letter and his face darkened. "I'm afraid it'll go hard with you before the jury. I'll have to detain you."

"Dese iss vone outrage!" Brosseau exclaimed.

"You'll think so afore the Colonel gits through with you," said Jack. "Sheriff, I'll see you later. So long!"

"So long, Frenchie," said Hank, "we'll see you later."

Brosseau glared vindictively after them, muttering incoherent phrases.

Near midnight, two armed, masked men tied their bronchos and a wild mustang near the jail, forced open the door, gagged, bound and carried Brosseau to the wild mustang, upon whose bare back he was securely lashed. The men then mounted their saddled horses, and led the wild mustang about ten miles toward the mountains, where it was given its liberty with a sharp cut with a quirt. Away galloped the frightened animal, with its human load, wrenching a groan from Brosseau at every stride!

When the hoof-beats died away, the masked men turned their bronchos and silently returned.

It was suspected that Jack and Hank were the masked men; but it was never proven.

Howbeit, the perpetrators inflicted a terrible punishment upon the blackmailer, and they were satisfied that it was an awful revenge!

CHAPTER XVI

ON A WILD GOOSE CHASE

WHEN the whiskey revived Brosseau, his dormant senses awakened with a start, and his heavy eyes perceived Captain Kidd beside him. With a frightened stare and a half-smothered cry he attempted to rise; but sank back again with a groan. The Captain gave him another swallow. Presently the stimulant excited vital activity, and the circle of outlaws drew nearer to learn the cause of a man being bound to the bare back of a wild mustang and sent forth to die. In weak and broken utterance the story was told.

"So you think it's some of Colonel Maxwell's game?" Captain Kidd questioned, with a vindictive inclination.

Brosseau cursed the Colonel and swore to be revenged. Thus, a few days later he joined the renegades. Accordingly they laid plans and Brosseau returned home at once to make ready his ranch to secrete the band. Hence, it would afford them an excellent hiding place from which operations could be deftly performed. Captain Kidd explicitly warned Brosseau about retaliating insults, and urged him to go meekly about his ranch and work as if he were thoroughly cowed.

Upon arriving home, details were immediately consigned to carry on the game.

"Say," said Hank to Jack, as they met at the supper table, "seen the Frenchman this afternoon. Jus' a-comin' from his ranch."

"Was he glad to see you?" Jack asked.

"Not overjoyed. Seemed to be plumb bashful—kinder gave me the hull trail to myself."

"Hank," said Jack, simply, "watch out fer him when it's dark!"

"Wonder how he got off'n that hoss?" Hank asked.

"That's what's a-stickin' in my craw," admitted Jack, meditatively drumming the plate with his fork. "But, he's here—shore—an' I don't like it—not a little bit!"

"You kain't never always sometimes tell what a Frenchman is liable to do," Hank declared persuasively.

A man burst breathless into the mess-house. "I've seen Cap'n Kidd!" he announced.

"Whar!" exclaimed everyone, rising excitedly from the table.

"In my store!" answered the new-comer. "He come in an' throws down a hundred dollar bill. Says he, 'Kin you change it, pard?'

" 'A hundred dollars!' says I. 'Why, if I had a hundred dollars to my name, do you think I'd stay in this here dump?' "

"He was a-tryin' to feel you out," said Jack.

"Shore. 'Do you know my title?' says he, a-leanin' acrost the counter, with his gun almost 'gainst my bread-basket.

" 'Nope,' says I.

" 'Cap'n Kidd, of Arizona,' says he, confidential like.

"An' I almos' fell through the floor—in fact, I would've liked to! An' says I, 'You're shore welcome to all I've got: It's in the seegar box.'

"He helped himself to it, an' says, says he, 'Don't be too over-anxious to publish our first acquaintance, 'cause I'll be liable to come back soon an' renew it in a way whar friends mus' part. Savvy?'

"Then he give me a terrible look an' vamosed."

Dispatched riders quickly spread the news, and in a short time a large posse rode forth. But it returned wornout and dejected.

"Well," grinned Brosseau, "two dollars a day iss no bad, und as vee no see the Cap'n und no keer to —vee jus' keep on a-ridin' und a-ridin'!"

"That's all right, Frenchie," sneered Hank, "but that's all a Frenchman's good fer!"

Instead of making an angry reply Brosseau submissively withstood the taunt.

"That Frenchman's liver is plumb white!" Hank contemptuously derided, joining Jack.

"Watch out fer him when it's dark!" Jack replied, as before.

At the supper table Hank began to plague Jack and Harry about May Maxwell.

Jack arose and turned to Harry: "Kid," he said, "when thar's two women to one man in this big, big world, why does every girl have two lovers? It's always so."

"Jus' to make it more interestin', Jack, I reckon," Harry replied, lightly.

As Jack was leading the way out, a flash of light grazed his side! The metallic thud instantly brought forth three six-shooters. The men instinctively knew that a big bowie-knife quivered in the door jamb and their eyes searched the darkness, then the trio retreated within the room and slammed the door. Jack quickly extinguished the light. Then joined the others at the window. No object relieved their straining eyes; everything lay calmly quiescent in the moonlight.

"A perty close shave," Harry remarked. "In an unguarded moment you're liable to git caught, Jack."

"I know it, Kid," Jack admitted. "But a feller in love is always foolish!"

"Good thing that dang knife-thrower was bashful 'bout bein' seen," Hank declared. "Whew! you kin hear a gun or see its smoke, but a knife—Gee! it makes shivers go up my back!"

"Didn't I tell you, Hank, 'watch out when it's dark'?" said Jack.

"Seems to me you did, Jack—now that I recollect. I think we'd better go over an' make Frenchie a visit—after dark!"

They dismounted near Brosseau's ranch house and cautiously crawled on their hands and knees toward it. A flash of lightning illumined the eastern horizon and a low rumbling of thunder followed. Then it began to sprinkle. Heavy clouds soon completely obscured the mountains and wrapped the valley in mist. The men crouched against the house for shelter and protection. The lightning flashed again and again! The thunder crashed and boomed and rolled in the mountains! The large rain-drops increased. A door slammed and the men crouched closer. Then the blanket was drawn back from the window and they saw a face within the faint light peering out. They caught their breath. But the light feebly penetrated the darkness and was lost in the torrents of water, which beat in sheets against the window, and the wind whistled and moaned through the casing.

"Wow! listen to the firmaments!" they heard a voice at the window and they knew that it was Brosseau's.

The blanket fell. As it was dark once more, Jack knocked out a pane of glass with the butt of his six-shooter. With a mighty gust the wind burst through, the blanket flapped, and the light flickered. Immediately ready hands within caught the lower corners of the blanket and held it firmly. Brosseau called for a hammer and nails. In a short time the blanket was securely fastened, making temporary repair.

Through the blinding fury sounded the plaintive neigh of a horse. Quickly the light went out. Inside it was perfectly quiet. Brosseau prudently peeped from behind the blanket and in the play of the lightning he thought that he discovered fleeting forms. But on such a night he was not positive. Nevertheless he involuntarily dropped to the floor and wormed his way from the wall.

"What's up?" came a whisper a few feet from the left.

Brosseau instinctively tightened his grip on his six-shooter. Recognizing the voice, he told of his apprehension.

"That's what you git fer throwin' knives! Didn't I warn you?"

"Vell, Cap'n Kidd," Brosseau meekly acknowledged, "I jus' couldn't help it! I hate 'em!"

The Captain cursed him for a fool, and added, "Well, it's done. They'll watch this place like a cat after a rat. It ain't the rain that busted that window. I've got to git out of here an' plumb lively. An' ain't this a perty night to travel!"

Thus Captain Kidd's band of wet and haggard men surprised the "Lazy I" ranch the following morning and took possession. They rested there all day and departed after dark with fresh horses taken from the corral. The owner bitterly resented the theft and quickly reported his loss.

Captain Kidd retreated into the foothills of Black Peak, with the cattlemen hot on his trail. They cursed the falling darkness and camped, impatient for the expected battle of to-morrow.

From surrounding hills burned signal fires; that Apache Kidd had stirred up the Indians was evident. To take their notorious chief would mean bloodshed, and although the cattlemen were all deadly shots and reckless to the last deed, they knew that it would be good policy to await re-enforcements. The braves were heavily armed, had a big supply of ammunition, and they would fight to the death! Hence, in the veil of night the cattlemen stealthily withdrew.

The next day Captain Kidd took up a strong position, with his back on the brim of a deep precipice; he could not be attacked from the rear, owing to the steep walls of the gorge; and, in the face of a charge, his men must either repel it or be swept back into the gulch! These conditions, the crafty chief knew, would spur his men to fight to the last—they would have no alternative! To his further satisfaction small bands of Indians continually joined him during the day. Thus darkness closed hostile preparations.

In the morning, a small band of Indians joining them, reported that they had been fired upon by a party of cattlemen. At once arose the spirit of the warpath! Captain Kidd warned his brothers of walking into a trap. "The palefaces," said he, conclusively, "are like the leaves of a big forest! Thar guns are long an' never stop shootin'. To go to 'em is like the helpless deer at a lick. But the deer has legs and runs fast—let the hunters come to us!"

But "the hunters" did not appear, and Tony Hart, a half-breed, came to Captain Kidd and advised him that the braves were becoming restless and uneasy.

"All right, lootenant," said the Captain, "take a dozen or two an' see what devilment you kin stir up."

Consequently, Tony Hart sallied forth with twenty braves thirsting for plunder and life. Appearing suddenly in a peaceful valley an old rancher was captured. This aroused the old lust for blood.

The situation became critical. Fearing for their lives, neighboring ranchers fled from their homes, leaving them to the torch. Ed Maxwell hastily organized a strong posse and started in pursuit of the renegades, who would dash from the hills, wound and kill, and then quickly retreat into them. Thus homes were deserted and their destruction easy.

But on one occasion a posse managed to slip between a small band of Indians and the mountains and a hot fight ensued. The Indians took refuge in a ranch house, and returned a hot fire with their trusty Spencer repeaters. During the skirmish the house burst into flames. The smoke became so dense that marksmanship was difficult, so the posse lay in a shallow ditch to wait for the smoke to clear away. Presently a larger band of Indians, drawn by the firing, appeared on the scene, and in the fight the ones in the house fled. The braves then retreated slowly toward the hills, stubbornly resisting every foot of ground, and drawing the cattlemen toward their stronghold. Casualties occurred on both sides. The Indians carried their wounded with them into the hills.

About four o'clock in the afternoon Jack Morris halted the posse. "Thar's white men with 'em up thar an' we'd better wait fer help." So they bivouacked without a single camp-fire for the night. Hank was sent to guide the re-enforcements.

As they were about to turn in, Jack turned to Harry Western and said: "Say, Kid, if we git the Cap'n this trip—if we do—" Jack hesitated, with an ambiguous sigh and fell to gazing at the stars.

When Ed Maxwell, heading a strong posse of cattlemen, joined them, the united forces pushed forward.

During the night a heavy fall of snow completely covered the trail in the hills. It made progress extremely tedious. The men were out of sorts; as they sluggishly toiled upward, it galled them to feel that while they groped along, they were being watched by Indian scouts.

"Kid," said Jack, "keep yore eyes peeled fer brown berries which grow under evergreen brush. Thar's liable to be a feather or two besides!"

Thus, Harry Western, perseveringly attentive, discovered a pair of brown, glistening "berries." His Winchester covered the spot and five of the posse pulled out an Indian spy, who, however, would not tell of Captain Kidd's rendezvous. Then Ed Maxwell ordered a rope thrown over the limb of a pine tree and the brave dangled in the air, kicking frantically and clawing desperately at the rope at his neck The posse remained grimly relentless. When almost unconscious he was lowered and again commanded to tell.

He struggled between native pretension of indifference to bearing pain without betraying feeling and the desire to live —because to divulge the hiding place would only mean a battle, and the Indians were heavily entrenched and had every advantage—yet, he despised to yield to the pale-faces, and again was strung up. His breath came in short convulsions and as his head began to swim he gasped, "Injun tell!" He was lowered again, the noose loosened, and he feebly accepted the proffered whiskey flask. The important facts forced from him greatly assisted the cattlemen. Thence they advanced in better spirits.

Under cover of the darkness Hank again went back for more help. The prospect of the coming fight and capture stirred the blood. The hope of the reward for Captain Kidd's body, dead or alive, spurred the plainsmen on. Therefore, while they took up a strong position to await re-enforcements, they stormed and fretted under the delay. Why not push on and crush the renegades? Wouldn't they know of the large army and scatter in the hills? But Ed Maxwell remained firm, instead of taking chances.

Jack and Harry were absent on a scouting tour; the time of their return was overdue, so in the night twenty men left camp and stole away, warily alert for ambuscades.

Two days later one of them returned to camp and reported to Ed Maxwell that Captain Kidd's band had scattered through the hills, making pursuit very difficult. A council was held to discuss the probability of an invasion of the hills. Would it be wise to endeavor to capture each fugitive, thus breaking up the plainsmen likewise and creating a man for man hunt?

"Jack rabbits shore make plenty tracks," said an old plainsman, "but it's a darn sight easier to jus' happen to come upon 'em than track 'em down! An', too, while we're huntin' fer 'em up here, the valley's unprotected an' the Kidd might take advantage of it to kill the women!"

The men glanced at each other in a manner which implied that such a calamity was likely to happen, but in their eagerness to overtake Captain Kidd they had been abstracted. All the best gun-fighters had joined the posse and consequently the ranches were left unguarded. Hence, it was concluded that Ed Maxwell and thirty men go in search of Harry Western and Jack Morris, while the rest return, with the Indian spy, to the valley as speedily as possible.

Although Harry and Jack had exchanged their high-heeled riding boots for moccasins, their trail, showing the prints of footsteps in the snow, where the weight was too much on the heels and the toes too squared to be that of an Indian, was readily followed by the little band of twenty frontiersmen who had left in search of them, and the trail of the frontiersmen's twenty horses' hoof-prints was taken up in turn by Ed Maxwell and his company of thirty resolute comrades.

Upon overtaking the party, Ed Maxwell learned that Jack's trail was lost, there being little snow and rocky surface. Therefore the united band simply followed the brim of the gorge in hopes of discovering some trace.

Thus, from a certain point, Jack Morris, glasses in hand, was seen standing calmly on a ledge of rock in bold relief against the misty surrounding wall of the canyon. Quickening their pace they continued around the brim. A little later they joined him.

"Whar's the Kid?" asked Ed.

"Which Kid? Apache or Harry?"

"Both, if you know."

"Harry's back yonder, watchin' my rear. As fer Apache Kidd—the devil only knows—I don't! He camped here. Must 've found out that we was too many fer him an' so he's scattered through the hills. We'll have a lovely time roundin' 'em up!"

"If we could only have shoved him down thar!" lamented one old cattleman, peering over the brim of the steep precipice.

"He wouldn't even be fit fer mince meat," declared another at his side. Silently they continued to gaze down into the canyon.

"Whar's the rest of the men, Ed?" Jack asked. "Followin' the river below?"

Ed Maxwell then explained the reason why they had returned to the valley.

"An' we'll have to let Apache Kidd slip through?" Jack protested.

"Not if we kin help it!" answered several at once.

As they bivouacked that night, Jack said to

Harry: "Kid, I reckon we're on a wild goose chase again!"

* * * * *

In a darkened room of Brosseau's shack sat Apache Kidd, carefully cleaning his brace of deadly six-shooters. Against the wall at his right leaned a big repeating Winchester. Presently he critically tested the action of each Colt's, replaced them in their holsters at his thighs and limped to the door, where he peeped through a little hole bored for the purpose. His face was haggard, his eyes blood-shot, but still the fierceness burned within them!

On entering the room Brosseau started back with a sharp exclamation of surprise. The Captain was supposed to be surrounded in the hills. How was it that he now was here?

"Wall?" the Kidd demanded, in a guarded tone.

"You've fooled 'em all right," said Brosseau, "fooled 'em slick as a vheestle!"

"An' now, Frenchie," concluded the clever renegade, "if you'll be kind enough to cut out the knife throwin' act, I'll honor you with my highly esteemed company." He hobbled to his Winchester, picked it up and sat down again on the box. "Have you got anythin' fer a sprained ankle?" he asked perversely.

"Some goot leenamint, Cap'n."

"Wall, why do you stan' thar fer! Why don't you git it!"

When Brosseau had disappeared the Chief sighed perfunctorily. "Nowadays one's vassals ain't worth two hurrahs!

"An' why, O chief—King of the Mountains, Ruler of Blood-suckers, dost thou love thy Greatness! Thy throne is the eagle's nest, thy kingdom far below thee. Make ready the feast! We'll eat, drink an' be merry, fer to-morrow we —Say, Frenchie, is that the way thou bringst wine to the king!"

"It ain't vine, Cap'n, it's leenamint."

The renegade sprang up and snatched the bottle, crying, "But it kin be drank!"

The terrified Frenchman struggled to hold the bottle from the Chief's lips. "It keel you, Cap'n, it keel you dead!" he pleaded.

The Captain sank wearily back on the box. As the bandage was unwound from his swollen foot, he sighed weakly. "Didn't King David say, Frenchie, 'Gather not thy soul with sinners, nor thy life with bloody men'?"

The bandage fell from Brosseau's trembling hands and he gazed nonplussed into the face of the fanatic outlaw. "Dey got some Injuns, Cap'n," said he, "but no you!"

The Captain grinned self-indulgently. "So, the prize bird has flew the coop—eh, Frenchie?"

"Dey are so tam mat, Cap'n, dat dey kain't see straight!" Brosseau laughed.

A song of Captain Kidd's exploits had been composed in the past, and, gloating over his successful maneuvers, he now sang exultant snatches:

" 'Oh, this Cap'n played havoc, boys,
With Uncle Sammy's mail;
But what's the use of hunting
When the bandit left no trail?

' "Oh, the sheriff he went noodly,
And the blood-hounds they were sad,
This man they lynched in effigy,
They were so very mad!

" 'This Apache was a daisy, boys;
He never left a track;
But where he hides it is a joke—
The drinks are on you, Jack!' "

"Sh!" warned Brosseau, "dey'll hear!"

"Them tenderfeet couldn't track an elephant in two feet of snow!" sneered the fugitive, and he spat contemptuously at a cockroach crawling up the dusty wall.

CHAPTER XVII

WHEREBY ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

THE night was warm and balmy; the leaves sighed softly overhead and the old cottonwood trees in the Maxwell ranch yard looked more majestic than ever in the bright moonlight. The monotonous chirp of the cricket, the spooky hoot of the owl and the conglomeration of weird sounds arising from the plains did not disturb either May Maxwell, who sat on a bench under the tree playing her guitar, or Jack Morris, who stood near, keeping time with his foot to the sweet strains. The favorite selections brought back to her fond memories of college days and seemed to transform the untamed surroundings into the campus. Around the corner of the house peeped Ed Maxwell's large, grey eyes, and he impulsively clutched the big sombrero behind him!

Finally the song ended in a long-drawn chord and Jack glanced admiringly at May. Then he walked to the *olla* suspended from the porch roof, filled the tin dipper with a cool draught and returned with it. Thanking him she drank the refreshing water.

After a silence he ventured: "Isn't the moon glorious! Did you ever see it appear so large before?"

"Like all things of the West," she smiled, "it is twice as large. Things are big-hearted here. Back East they seem to be more crabbed. Even the moon—and the air—the life!"

They lapsed into silence. A gentle gust of wind stirred the leaves overhead and with a faint sigh May began to play the dreamy strains of "A Spanish Cavalier." After a few measures of the rhythmic strains the notes grew bolder, and unconsciously his voice blended in low refrain. They sang the second verse and repeated the chorus. As they began the third stanza his voice swelled and he happened to glance toward her. Without wavering he continued, gaining confidence with each bar. Before his irrepressible voice hers quite naturally dropped and he sang again the chorus:

"Say, darling, say, when I am far away,
Say that sometimes you'll think of me, dear.
The bright, sunny days will soon pass away—
Remember what I say, and be true, dear."

A heart-rending cry pierced the balmy air! The girl instinctively clutched Jack's arm. "Oh!" she cried.

"Only a kyute," he laughed.

A horse neighed and a little colt answered innocently.

"Isn't it picturesque!" May ardently exclaimed. "Doesn't the very air make one feel that it's good to live!"

Her fingers wandered idly over the strings, and beautiful chords floated softly on the night air. The two remained silent in dreamy meditation.

Presently he looked up. "But on a night like this," he smiled, "don't you miss the States?"

She became suddenly pensive. "Yes, I do," she confessed. "I miss some things very much. But, otherwise, I'm entirely satisfied. And, why should I complain now?"

"Still, there's something lacking, isn't there?"

"I fear that I'm too ambitious," she admitted.

"That so?" he mused, and lapsed into silence. "But, you've entirely lost the sentiment."

"The sentiment? Of what?"

"I don't blame you, though. I fear that I'm a very poor poet."

"Don't you think your qualities will manifest themselves in time?" she encouraged.

"Well," said he, sitting beside her, "there may be hope."

"Then don't give up the ship, Jack—please."

He flashed her a confidential smile. "Not while the mate stands by my side!" he replied.

Again the coyote's heart-rending cry pierced the air. The girl broke off shortly and stared around.

"There goes the poetry!" Jack complained, helplessly, turning toward the direction whence came the intruding sound.

"Isn't it mournful?" the girl exclaimed.

"What? The poetry?" smiled Jack.

The rasping "K-awh! K-awh!" of a mule broke the temporary tranquility. Jack arose: "Would you not prefer to be in yore den?" he asked.

"Sit in the house on such a night as this!" she protested.

"Don't you really miss the States?" Jack asked, glancing around. "This is so different."

"Of course, in a way. Yet, to me the fantastic always appeals."

"But I'm shore you were a social lion!" he flashed.

"A social lion? Have you ever heard me roar?" she smiled.

He dropped his eyes and faltered, "Not—not as much as yore countenance. It's ferocious!"

"I thought I was smiling," she replied, with assumed astonishment.

"Social lions always capture their prey with smiles," he adroitly but gently admonished.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, straightening a little. "They do? Really, you must have been in a den! And how did you escape without being torn to pieces?" Her smile deepened, her dark eyes sparkled, and she continued: "I'll wager, like Daniel you simply closed their savage mouths!"

"Don't you think that this is rather a barren jungle for a famished lion?" he smiled. Approaching footsteps caused Jack to hesitate. Ed Maxwell joined them, and the subject was changed.

At breakfast the next day the "Coo! coo!" of Señora doves caused May to make some remark about them.

"Thar's a pair of anuther kind of doves a-cooin' 'round this outfit—eh, Ed?" winked the Colonel.

But the glare Ed gave and the pretty blush that May endeavored to hide were deplorable!

CHAPTER XVIII

A RUN ON THE BANK

THE deposits of the Maxwell City bank had increased satisfactorily and the Colonel rubbed his hands, smiling contentedly as he looked over the balance sheet. "William," said he to the teller, "from present indications, we'll have to buy another safe."

William—who was none other than "our old friend Bill Upton of Shecawgo," smiled assuredly and said, "I believe that we can spare some gold. Why not have a correspondent at Phoenix?"

"Don't open too big an account, William; keep a good reserve here: the bank is very young and we mus' always be ready to meet a run. It's different back East whar you kin ask a dozen banks fer aid. But here—this bein' the only financial institution—in case of emergency, what could we do? Why, in case of trouble, the customers would rush in here like a herd of stampedin' 'cows'! If we couldn't pay when they demanded thar money, what would happen?"

William replied that he would prefer to be elsewhere.

"So would I!" declared the big cattleman tersely. "That's the very reason I only allow you to loan fifty per cent., an' advertise how strong we run. It's a big ad, William, a big ad!"

"For robbers?" William proffered, suggestively.

"Tut! tut! man, they won't fool 'round this bank; it's too risky."

They were interrupted by a customer, who deposited a good sum of money. When he went out the Colonel turned again toward the teller. "Yes, sir, William, we'll have to buy a new safe! Jus' see how the money comes rollin' in. We've got a good start an' we'll push this thing right along!"

William remarked that it certainly was encouraging. "Say, Colonel," he added, mechanically fingering some negotiable papers, "Fifer's note of five hundred dollars falls due to-morrow. Shall I insist that he pay it? It will be the third renewal."

"Didn't Brosseau sign it with him?"

"Yes; and I'm afraid that he'll have to pay it."

"I don't like this signin' other people's obligations," remarked the Colonel. "It's all very well as long as thar met. But when the signer is called upon to fork up, thar's always trouble."

Thus when Brosseau appeared at the bank he absolutely refused to settle the note. "I no git the money," he argued. "Fifer's got to pay."

"Why did you put yore signature to this paper, then?" demanded the Colonel. "Fer fun?"

"It no my note," stubbornly persisted the Frenchman.

"Shore, it is, Mr. Brosseau; here's yore name —right here!"

"Vall, I no pay!"

"You won't! Well, we'll see! I'll give you jus' three days—seventy-two hours!"

Judgment was at once entered against Brosseau.

"He'll pay, William, he'll pay," smiled the Colonel, rubbing his hands. "We're not worryin', not a bit! Let him play ass awhile—it's a-costin' him ten per cent an' costs, jus' the same! I reckon his ranch an' outfit are worth perty near five hundred—don't you? Oh, you bet! That note's good as gold! It's all hunky an' will bring fifty dollars 'loans and discounts' per annum."

Then his manner became more serious: "But, the point's this: Mr. Brosseau—whatever his social qualities may be—is solid financially, an' we've made him angry—he's taken a personal grudge against this bank now. That's why I dislike our customers to ask another to sign their notes with 'em. Now, Brosseau's taken away his account, an' it was no fault of ours."

The following day Brosseau came in the bank to pay the judgment.

"Now, now, Mr. Brosseau," the Colonel softly spoke, laying his hand on the indignant signer's arm, "what's the good of gittin' all riled up over this? It isn't our fault at all."

"It's ver' hard to pay fer someding you no owe," whined the Frenchman, watching the teller skillfully counting the gold he had reluctantly placed on the counter.

"Yore name's on the note an' we loaned good money on it," persisted the Colonel.

"I dell you vat, Maxwell, you vouldn't 've seen a zent of my mooney, if you hadn't fixed the deal in court!"

" 'Fixed the deal'!"

"You rich cattle-ginks know yore beeziness!"

"It's no use wastin' words with you, Brosseau, —wranglin' here like two kids over marbles! It's after bankin' hours now an' I only let you in as a matter of accommodation."

"You're always very obligin' vhen the money's comin' yore vay. But, it's anudder ding vhen—"

"Mr. Brosseau, we won't argue the matter jus' now. It's near supper time an' I feel tired an' hungry; consequently a feller's liable to git irritated."

Brosseau took the receipted note and examined it: "Dat's the las' vone I sign," he avowed, putting it in an inside pocket. He walked abruptly to the front door and found it locked.

"Jus' turn that little knob," said the Colonel.

"Deese one?" asked the Frenchman, turning it. He opened the door.

Instantly the entrance was blocked with four men, each carrying two big Colt's. The bankers were covered. The surprise was too sudden and up went their hands involuntarily before the command was finished. The Frenchman apparently was a little slow, and a Colt's darted toward his stomach.

"Ouch!" he exclaimed, doubling up.

The leader ordered the safe opened. "Be quick 'bout it!" he commanded, sharply, with his six-shooter against the teller's head. William could not help but obey; with trembling fingers he turned the combination. The robbers snatched up the heavy canvas bags of gold while Brosseau and the bankers were lined up, facing the wall. As the gold was hastily carried out one of the outlaws kept them to the wall. Shortly he backed toward the front door, with the threatening warning: "The firs' guy that follows us will git his! So long, gentlemen. How's the bankin' business?"

As he disappeared William was about to turn to give the alarm. The Colonel caught him by the sleeve saying, "Not so fast, William, they're a-watchin' the door!"

"Goot ding, Maxwell," slurred the Frenchman, "I pay dat note afore deese—eh!"

They heard the rattle of a fast retreating wagon. William rushed to his cage for his revolver, but discovered that it was gone. He hurried to the Colonel's desk and also found his weapon missing.

"Colonel," said he, "you lock the safe. I'll raise the alarm."

"Vat I do?" Brosseau asked.

"Go out an' yell like blazes!" the Colonel answered excitedly.

William threw open the front door, stepped out, and called for help at the top of his voice. Down the street careered the canvas-top-covered spring wagon, enveloped in a cloud of adobe dust; under the stinging cuts of the lash the frightened horses galloped at full speed!

"Dat's mine outfit!" wailed the distracted Frenchman, looking after the wagon. "Dat's mine! Oh, stop 'em! stop 'em!"

Even as the yells attracted attention, the madly driven wagon aroused some cowboys, lounging on the street. Immediately there was a wild scurrying for horses, and a hot pursuit! To add to the confusion a continuous barking of dogs, loud yelling of townsmen and plainsmen, and firearm reports vibrated the air. Thus, heavily armed, a posse swept on.

At the bars of the Limping Fawn outfit the exhausted team was overtaken. Within four hundred yards every member of the posse had slipped from his horse and advanced behind it for protection. Cautiously approaching the wagon—from which they had expected a fusillade—they were perplexed to find it empty.

"They've shore melted!" declared the man, who had inertly investigated. "Not a thing left." The Colonel gave the panting team into his charge, and led the posse up to the ranch house door. The Colonel unceremoniously opened the door to demand explanation. To his increasing perplexity the owner was not there. With insinuating accusations the posse overhauled the ranch buildings. But without success.

"Well," confessed the Colonel, "it shore looks bad!"

The twilight deepened perceptibly, forcing a temporary complication. In conclusion it was decided to camp at the ranch to await the dawn.

During the night, Ed Maxwell, Hank, Harry Western and Jack Morris, with others, rode into camp. Early in the morning a cattleman joined them. He claimed the team that had carried the robbers to safety, explaining that he had offered them for sale to Brosseau, and that the Frenchman had asked to try them before purchase, which was quite natural. Brosseau had driven to town to pay his note, tying the team near the bank. When the robbers rushed out with the money they saw their chance, jumped into the wagon and escaped.

"Colonel," said Jack, "did you notice any tracks around the wagon?"

"We were too interested in the contents of it to think—we expected bullets any second. When we come to our senses we'd tramped everythin' down."

"Well, to my thinkin'," Jack calculated, "the robbers have either got fresh bronc's at this ranch or they've jumped out of the wagon back a-piece, givin' the bronc's a lick to send 'em on to put us off the scent. By the way, Colonel, is Brosseau with you?"

"He was durin' the hold-up, but I haven't seen him since."

"I want to see him. If anyone happens to run acrost him, jus' tell him."

"What's the nex' move, Jack?" inquired the Colonel.

"I reckon you'd better go back to the bank, Colonel, an' help Bill Upton. He said that the fun's liable to happen, when yore depositors hear of the hold-up; they're liable to make another kind of run on the bank."

The Colonel looked worried.

"Why not close the doors fer a day or two," suggested Ed. "We kin git some money from Phoenix."

"We kain't hardly close the doors," gravely replied the Colonel. "Mos' of our depositors wouldn't savvy the situation an' the bank would be mobbed. I believe it would be wiser to open the doors an' reason with the customers. If we kin cool 'em down they'll see that it'll all come out right in the end."

When the Colonel returned to the bank, the teller was endeavoring to pacify some excited depositors. The Colonel at once explained his position. While thus engaged, Brosseau entered the bank, approached them haughtily and presumptuously demanded payment of a two thousand dollar check.

"Mr. Brosseau," calmly replied the Colonel, "you know very well our unfortunate circumstances, an' you know it is impossible to pay—"

"You no pay! You no pay!" screamed the Frenchman.

"Now, Mr. Brosseau—"

"You no pay! Vat kind of bank is deese! She busted! She busted!"

"Sh!" warned the Colonel, seeing several men entering the door. "We'll pay you day after to-morrow."

"Pay now! Pay now! No! Oh! I've lost—I'm ruined—the bank, she busted! The bank, she busted!" he cried, rushing out, bemoaning his loss.

When money is involved the least suspicious circulation spreads like wild-fire; mortal man seems to lose all reason, and when rumors of a bank failure throw persons into this agitated state, a bank which loans fifty to seventy-five per cent of its deposits is helpless to satisfy accounts on demand—especially when that bank is some distance from a reserve city. Thus, the Maxwell City Bank awaited the inevitable!

Each rumor of the failure was exaggerated grossly, and each repetition worked the town into increasing frenzy. Depositors poured pell-mell into the banking-room, demanding with tears in their eyes, their money! They pushed toward the teller's window, crying, begging and threatening. William shivered as he glanced over that crazy mob. The Colonel endeavored to make himself heard, but his voice was drowned out in the tumult. Then he pounded fiercely on his desk with his heavy cane. A hush fell instantly on the throng.

"Gentlemen," declared the Colonel, emphatically, "this bank ain't busted! You'll git every cent back you've put in. I'm good fer the hull amount a hundred times! Yes, two hundred times—three hundred times—four hundred—five —six—twenty! Go home like decent citizens. Ain't my word good?"

"Pay our mooney!" cried Brosseau. "Pay our mooney!"

"An' you, Brosseau!" exclaimed the Colonel, shaking his cane at him, "you measly sneak! You maliciously started this run jus' because I made you pay an hones' debt!"

"I pay my note," Brosseau answered. "But vhy you no pay deese check?"

"I will!"

"Vhen?"

"Jus' as soon as I kin express the money from Phoenix."

"You'll be in ol' Mexico afore then!" Brosseau insinuated.

"You git out of here!" yelled the Colonel, flourishing his cane.

"Colonel," said William, "he's only trying to make you lose your temper. Don't pay any attention to him."

" I vant my mooney," whimpered the Frnchman. "I vant my mooney!"

William walked up to him. "Mr. Brosseau," said he, "you and every customer of this bank will receive the Colonel's personal judgment note."

"An' if my notes ain't worth as much as gold, neither is the Maxwell estate, *an' neither is the United States!*" proudly acclaimed the Colonel.

A murmur of admiration went up from the crowd. Then, the depositors, who had rushed in panic-stricken, hung their heads and sneaked out.

CHAPTER XIX

THE COUNTERFEIT

ALTHOUGH the Colonel had promised his depositors that they would not lose a cent, a few doubting ones really demanded his personal judgment note. Of this faint-hearted element Brosseau was the leader.

"Thar," said the Colonel, handing him the legal instrument, "you've got my ten-day judgment note, Brousseau, an' you kin enter up judgment against me in thirty minutes. I'll show you that I kin redeem my notes with a leetle more grace than you did. Now, git out of here, you coward, an' don't let me see yer sneakin' face ag'in!"

"Ain't you sorry you mak' me pay dat note I no owe?" taunted the Frenchman.

The check that he had presented for payment on the bank was drawn in his favor by Shorty Cameron of the Bar-O-Bar. "Judging from this, Mr. Brosseau," said William, holding up the check, "you must have sold some land."

"Shore."

"It dates two weeks back."

"Dat's when I sol' the land."

"Do you mean to say that you've held a two thousand dollar check all this time, Mr. Brosseau?"

"It was foolish. Und I'd rather have the land back now under the circumstances."

"You're not worrying now, Mr. Brosseau, are you?"

"Not so much wid deese note in mine possession. An' I'm glad dat Maxwell no keep all his aiggs in one baskit! Still, deese affair has ben mos' unfortunate to me. Meester Cameron expected to buy conseederable more land from me —but now vhat kin he do? The bank is busted und he mus' be ruined!"

"Oh!" flashed the Colonel, "he wouldn't buy yore land until the title was cleared of that judgment! Is that why you paid it, Brosseau?"

"Vell, dat's mine affair!"

"Why didn't you cash Mr. Cameron's check before this?" demanded William, suspiciously studying the Frenchman.

"Und keep sech a beek zum of mooney in mine shack—oh, no! Cap'n Keedd is no dead!"

"Then why did you slap the check on us today?' William questioned.

"I vant the mooney, dat's all!"

"You knew that in my extremity I wouldn't have it!" stormed the Colonel. " You done it for revenge—that's what!"

"Call it vhat you vill, Maxwell—I no care!"

"An' further, Brosseau, you created the run!"

"No I. Vee all vent to pieces vhen vee heard dee awful news."

The Colonel leaned across the counter: "You knew well enough, Brosseau, that a few paltry thousands wouldn't break me!"

"I no take chances, Maxwell!"

"I reckon that's why you tried out that team afore buyin' it!" sneered the Colonel.

"Exactly! Who wouldn't have?"

An old man stepped from the small crowd. "Anybody would've done the same thing," he remarked, sympathetically.

The Colonel turned savagely upon Brosseau's new champion and was about to utter an angry retort, when William whispered in his ear, "That old man is Jack Morris in disguise."

With an involuntary gasp the Colonel sat down, wondering what would be the game.

"Anything more that we can do for you, Mr. Brosseau?" William insinuated.

"Dat's all. Goot day."

As the Frenchman was about to go the old man laughed, "Wasn't that a good joke?"

"Vhat?" asked Brosseau, turning toward his new acquaintance.

"Why, the way them bank robbers rustled yer wagon an' made you walk home!" laughed the old man with increasing mirth.

"I no valk home. Borried a zaddle-hoss."

"Oh," grinned the old man, "I heard you walked. Didn't some feller say he seen you a-footin' it over by the Limpin' Fawn?"

"Dat grazy mare bucked me off!"

"Thar! didn't I say you walked? So you was pitched off? Didn't git hurt, did you?"

"No. I turned a zummerset over the maare's head und landed on mine foots."

"You took no chances thar, Brosseau," dryly commented the Colonel.

"Nevair, Maxwell!"

"Not even with the bank!" grinned the old man.

"Not with a cripple!" sneered the Frenchman. "But mebbe Maxwell's judgment note is worth somedings!"

"You kain't prove it by me," answered the old man. "He wouldn't even give me his note," he added plaintively.

"He vouldn't!" exclaimed the Frenchman. "Vhy?"

"They said I'd have to be identified fu'st."

"Whose check is it?" inquired the Frenchman.

"Why—mine, I reckon."

"I mean, who drew it?"

"Why, let me see—here's my name—an' here's Shorty Cameron's. I sold him a small bunch of cows. You know Shorty Cameron—everybudy does, I reckon—he's good as gold!"

"Are you shore dat's yore name?" questioned Brosseau.

"Shore, I'm shore!" firmly attested the old man. "I'll write it on the back."

"Dat vouldn't prove yore identity," Brosseau replied. "Iss it an order or bearer check?"

"Kin savvy?" asked the old man in a puzzled tone.

Brosseau examined it. "Payable to bearer," said he. "Write yore name on the back un' I cash it."

"Think of the risk you're takin'," sarcastically said the Colonel. "An' you don't take 'chances,' Brosseau!"

"I'm a-goin' to corner Maxwell notes!" retaliated the Frenchman. He turned to the old man: "Come, do you vant the mooney?"

"Bet yore life! I need it, stranger, bad! I'd like to start back home right away—I'm waitin' to see how this mess pans out."

" All right—Ten dollars deescount—eh?"

"What?"

"You pay me ten dollars deescount for cashin' the check—bankin' beeziness—eh, Maxwell?"

"Ten dollars fer cashin' a two hundred and fifty dollar check!" protested the old man.

"Regular deescount!" persisted the Frenchman.

Perceiving his position the old man reluctantly handed the Frenchman two five dollar silver certificates. Brosseau instinctively glanced them over and hesitated. Holding one of them up, he declared, "Deese bill iss a counterfeet!"

"What!" cried the old man.

"Deese iss a counterfeet!" repeated Brosseau, assuredly. The old man took the bill and carefully scrutinized it. "Ask the bankers, if you no believe me," persisted the Frenchman.

The old man held up the bill for William's inspection. "Yes," declared the teller, "it is a counterfeit."

"What place have I fallen into!" cried the old man, faintly.

William then informed him that the bank would be required to retain the counterfeit and turn it in to the government. The old man resented; but it was explained to him that unless he knew from whom he received it, it was absolutely his loss.

Brosseau become impatient during the discussion and thrust some gold pieces into the old man's hand. After a careful count the old man said, "Why, thar's only two hundred an' fo'ty dollars!"

"Deescount," Brosseau explained. Throwing the check on the counter he demanded payment. The teller's fallen countenance made him grin, and he added pungently, "Vell, Maxwell's note, of course!"

As the Colonel handed his signed note to the Frenchman, he slurred, "Mebbe you kin make a few more tens, Brosseau!" The Frenchman grinned and assured them that if they happened to hear of anyone wishing to "deescount paper," he would be most happy to accommodate, "now, dat the bank vas busted!"

To show his appreciation the old man invited Brosseau to drink with him. As they disappeared through the front door, the Colonel turned to William and asked, "What in blazes are you young scamps up to?" The teller solicited him to be patient. "An' while we're a-foolin' here with that Frenchman how about the bank robbers?" stormed the big cattle man. "What's Ed?" he inquired.

William replied that Ed was leading the posse in the hunt for the robbers.

"He's sensible!" the Colonel declared. "An' what's a little five dollar counterfeit, anyway, when the bank's be'n cleaned up!"

"Leave it to Jack Morris," William implored. "I was with him at Wagon Mound, Colonel, an' you should have seen him at work. Don't you remember how he—"

"But what's a counterfit got to do with it?" interrupted the Colonel, nervously.

"I recognized it at once because Jack had begged it from me, saying that he had a little scheme. Didn't you note how he drew Brosseau on? He did it so easily and naturally that I did not at first savvy. But, when he sprang that counterfeit! I expected him to trip up the Frenchman right there, but he didn't, and you'll see he has a card up his sleeve!"

After a social drink, the old man invited the

Frenchman to dine with him; but Brosseau declined with profuse thanks, saying that he had an important engagement and could not possibly accept. However, he asked the old man if he could keep a secret, and upon being assured, confidentially asserted that something was wrong with the bank; he had a strong suspicion that the Colonel had been unfortunate in speculation. And now the bank disaster! How long at this rate could the Colonel last? He must be planning to abscond to Mexico. In the face of such possibilities the old man questioned the act of buying additional bank notes. Brosseau emphatically declared that he could not bear to see an old man in trouble, and at the same time, helping him out, he could annoy the Colonel without risk, as he had an inside tip on the deal. The old man straight-forwardly charged him to publish his suspicions; if the Colonel intended to leave he should be placed in custody.

"Do you dink I should tell?" the Frenchman asked.

"Shore," answered the old man convincingly. "I don't savvy why you made me promise to keep my head shet."

"She's a nasty ding to git out!" the Frenchman remarked.

"But think of all the money innocent folks will lose. Say, I orter tell—if you don't mind?"

"Vell—use yore judgment, old man, only don't mention any names, dat's all."

In floating the treacherous rumor, Brosseau endeavored to avoid implication, hence he tried to give the false impression that he would rather keep it secret. At the same time he worked to arouse indignation against the Colonel and thus spread it with other lips. Jack Morris—the old man—of course conjectured this, and consequently fell into the Frenchman's design as congenially as if he were the symbol of innocence. Playing the part of a dupe, therefore, he remarked that he would not have thought that Colonel Maxwell would have been so dishonest.

"W'at 's all this fuss 'bout, anyway?" inquired the barkeep, who had listened attentively, and he had heard every word, because they were spoken intentionally loud. Brosseau painstakingly explained. "But, I kain't savvy why you're buyin' every Tom, Dick and Harry's note," remarked the puzzled liquor dealer.

"Oh, he's a good feller," declared the old man. "Everybudy's friend. I come along an' says he, 'I'll help you,' an' shore pop he does!"

A man slouched up to the bar and ordered a drink. Brosseau tacitly suggested to acquaint him with the deplorable news. "He's too ripe in years," whispered the old man; "gray ha'rs don't keer fer idle gossip. He shore is a hard lookin' customer! Mebbe he's Cap'n Kidd! Reckon I'll deeposit my cash in the bank."

"Vould you trust Maxwell after all you know?" Brosseau asked, incredulously.

"Why not? Ain't it safer to put money in a bank than to carry it on my person?"

"Vasn't the bank robbed?" Brosseau answered. "Und what protection did it offer?"

But the old man argued that if Colonel Maxwell's notes satisfied others, he would be willing to accept them. Perceiving that his chance of getting possession of the old man's gold was slipping away, Brosseau attempted to inculcate that he had an inside tip; otherwise, he would not have touched a note of Maxwell's. But the old man was obstinate. Hence, Brosseau accompanied him to see if Colonel Maxwell treated him fairly, as he explained.

As they re-entered the bank, the Colonel feigned impatience, and testily exclaimed, "What, you back again?"

Brosseau apparently enjoyed the ill-humor, and he dryly replied, "I've brought you a new customer, Maxwell."

The Colonel noted the slight inflection, and he returned his thanks in the same tone, his dry humor savored as with the alkali itself.

"You no appreciate it, Maxwell?" retorted the Frenchman.

"You're mistaken, my dear boy; we appreciate it very much. What does yore friend desire? Certificate of deposit or a checking account?"

"Yore own personal judgment note is all dat goes now, Maxwell," Brosseau answered in a tone which conveyed much meaning.

Instead of treating the small crowd of spectators gathered around to a quarrel, the Colonel quietly made out his note and handed it to the old man, who critically examined it.

"I no git a commission?" persisted Brosseau, trying to arouse the Colonel's temper. But the Colonel turned his back on him, produced a cigar, lit it, and smoked unconcernedly. "Maxwell, you shore are accommodatin'," sneered the trouble-maker.

The old man looked up from the examination of the note. "Mr. Brosseau," said he, "would you like to hear me tell Colonel Maxwell a story?" The Frenchman grinned and nodded.

"Some years ago," continued the old man, "there was a feller who worked in a bank in gay Paree. This feller believed in takin' 'chances' —like you do— an' so he embezzled a big sum of money an' vamosed. Well, in my ambles after Apache Kidd I happened to hear of it an' jotted it down in my leetle note nook. The other day I happened to be a victim of a five dollar counterfeit an' it suggested a scheme to me. Says I to myself, 'If I ever run across a feller who is smart enough to detect the counterfeit, he must have had considerable experience with money an' might be a runaway banker from gay Paree.'" He glanced sharply at the Frenchman: "Need I continue the narrative, Mr. Brosseau?"

"It's ver' interestin'," answered the Frenchman, coolly. "Go on."

Then off came the disguise and in place of the old man stood Jack Morris. Brosseau simply stared at him as if he could not believe his eyes. "Wasn't half bad, was it, Frenchie?" sneered Jack. "You see, the Colonel's daughter is 'way up in the play-actin' business, an' she knows how to make up the hero to perfection.

"An' by the way, Frenchie, how long have you an' yore pals be'n rehearsin' yore little game? Don't you know the villain always dies? An' jus' to think that a leetle five dollar counterfeit did the trick!"

Brosseau slowly raised his eyes, but meeting Jack's stern gaze lowered them again. "I reckon my game's up," he muttered, in a low tone.

"Yes, I reckon it is," said Jack. "An' jus' because you couldn't refrain from trying to rile the Colonel."

"Vhy you no show me up vhen I deescovered the counterfeet?"

"Because, Frenchie, I want to keep this thing quiet till I've corralled yore pardners."

"Vhat do you mean by pardners?"

"Why, you had an engagement, didn't you?" Jack recalled.

"Dat vas only a blind. I dought you vere an easy mark, und intended takin' yore money;

but you vere too foxy und brought it to the bank."

"That's all very fine! But thar's another thing you'll have to answer fer, an' that is complicity in the hold-up of this bank."

"What!" the Colonel roared.

"Yes, he's responsible fer two kinds of a run on the bank. The firs' kind was natural enough, but the second was of an obscure nature—Frenchie, you're mixed up with a hard class of fellers. I wonder if yore wife will feel anxious tonight? An' to think of you fallin' into yore own trap, jus' because you couldn't resist irritatin' the Colonel with yore nasty leetle ways. Say, don't you feel like kickin' yoreself? Here, set down on this chair; you're gittin' weak in the knees."

The alleged absconder sank into the chair placed by Jack, who continued: "I s'pose you're trying to guess how I happened to ketch you with that counterfeit bill? Well, I'll tell you. You remember the remark you made after we'd given up Cap'n Kidd's trail? 'Two dollars a day iss no bad, und as vee no see the Cap'n—und no keer to—vee jus' keep on a-ridin' und a-ridin'!' When Hank sneered at yore woods, instead of gittin' mad, you meekly ignored him. Hank disgustedly told me, 'yore liver is plumb white!' But I warned him to look out fer you after dark. It wasn't natcheral fer you to be so submissive. That night you threw the bowie-knife at me, we followed you home. Say, but didn't you jump when I busted the window! You an' yore partner got busy in a hurry! We didn't find out who was with you, though. But I must confess that you slightly aroused the suspicious part of my 'detective' instincts, which by the way are very easily aroused an' ever ready to grasp at a straw!

"When Bill, here, casually remarked that you seemed to be well posted on banking, strange to say, I consulted my note book from mere idle curiosity, and I found that yore height, build an' general manhood was somewhat in the neighborhood of the description of that embezzler that parted company with gay Paree—although, of course, yore general appearance at present would not encourage one a great deal! Here's a copy of yore photograph I cut from a newspaper, an' you kin see fer yoreself that you gave us leetle opportunity to recognize you—yore heavy whiskered face forms quite a contrast with the saucy moustache on the photograph—of gay Paree!

"Well, as I said afore, I grasped at a straw. One day I brought some currency into the bank, an' Bill shoved out a five dollar bill with a smile an' tol' me that he couldn't accept counterfeits. Then I got an inspiration an' I says to myself, if Brosseau is a runaway banker, he'll bite on the counterfeit, an' so I asked Bill fer it. I waited fer the golden opportunity, an' today you bit so hard, Frenchie, I'm afraid we'll have to cut the hook out of yore gills!"

Brosseau sat with his elbows resting on his knees and his face in his hands, the picture of despair!

After a pause, the Colonel asked, "Have you anything to say, Mr. Brosseau?"

The absconder raised his head: "I no zay anyding just now. You zee, I'm in trouble, und it is hardly to my advantage to talk."

Jack bent over him: "Come, Frenchie, we're goin' over to see yore friends; they must be weary of the responsibility of the bank's money!"

"I don't know vhat you mean."

"Very well," said Jack, walking over to the teller's desk. "Bill, will you write down my questions and his answers?" Then turning to the Frenchman: "Mr. Brosseau, did you figure in the bank hold-up?" he questioned.

"No."

"Will you sign a sworn statement denying that charge?"

"I vill zign nutdings! I do not dink the question a propair vone."

"Knowing that the bank closes at six o'clock, what made you appear late?"

"Because I arrive late in town und I promised to pay the judgment dat day."

"Why was such a promise made? Was there any need?"

"Because I receive a check in full payment. I pay the judgment according to mine agreement!"

"Then, when the Colonel was accommodatin' enough to let you in, why did you pay the note so ungracefully?"

"How 'gracefully' vould you pay anudder man's note?"

"That's not the question."

"I vould not paid if the Colonel had not entered up judgment against mine property. Shorty Cameron inseested I pay all encumbrances before he would buy."

"Then he must have had explicit confidence in you to give that check afore you paid the judgment?"

"I promised him und I keep mine vord."

"Did you intend to cash Mr. Cameron's check after paying the judgment?"

"Not den. It vould have been dangerous to return home wid so large amount of money on mine person."

"When did you intend to cash the check?"

"The next day."

"Where would you have kept so large an amount of money? In the house?"

"Yes; for a short time."

"After the hold-up did you borrow a broncho and ride directly home or did you join in the chase?"

"I joined the chaze."

"On foot?"

"Yes."

"Then did you return to town an' borrow the broncho?"

"I deed."

"On the way home were you pitched off the broncho?"

"Yes."

"Then you walked home?"

"Yes."

"Did you see anyone on the way?"

"A rancher by the name of Landers. He walked wid me as far as hese ranch."

"About what time did you reach home?"

"About two in the morning."

"By what door did you enter yore house?"

"Back door."

"Did you meet anyone?"

"Mine vife."

"Did she appear to be worried?"

"Yes. I told her I vould be home airly. As I deed not, mine vife felt quite concerned."

"Did you retire at once?"

"No. We talked 'bout the hold-up."

"Will you still maintain that you were not connected with the robbery?"

"Most emphatically, yes!"

"Then you'll have to stand the consequences, Mr. Brosseau," said Jack, approaching him. "Thar's ugly rumors a-goin' 'round town that Brosseau's band robbed the bank an' the citizens are gittin' ready to lynch you, without waitin' fer the court. You'll be lynched shore; thar 'll be no hope! If I was in yore boots I'd rather try my chance with a Paree jury fer embezzlin' than trust myself with a New Mexico jury for complicity with such a scoundrel as Apache Kidd!"

"You no prove it!"

"I have my private opinion an' when I

publish that opinion, it won't take much proof to convince the jury. You've lived long enough 'round here to know how the citizens hate Cap'n Kidd, an' when they suspect that you are connected with him, they'll look upon you as a murderer!"

"What kin they prove I deed?"

"Mr. Brosseau," Jack snapped, "you are charged with complicity in the hold-up of this bank. I'll have to hold you here a few minutes. Bill, will you run over to the court house an' swear out a warrant for Brosseau's arrest? When he's landed in jail we'll not be responsible who takes him out."

As William came forward, the Frenchman arose, asking, "Vhat you vant?"

There was a loud report, a stream of fire, and the sound of falling glass! Brosseau again sank back on the chair.

William sprang toward him. Brosseau gasped "He thought I vas going to dell on heem—he shoot me—dat—Cap'n Keedd!"

"Cap'n Kidd!" exclaimed the others.

"Whar is he?" Jack demanded. "Whar is he?"

"Dey leeve in a cave under mine shack!"

"Thar ain't a minute to lose!" Jack cried, running toward the door.

CHAPTER XX

THE LAST OF CAP'N KIDD'S CLAN

At daybreak a strong posse surrounded Brosseau's adobe. As the circle drew in closer a big calibre Sharp's rifle was thrust through a loop-hole and fired point-blank without a parley. Barely had the man within its range slipped from his saddle when another 50-calibre leaden messenger whistled viciously overhead! Another bullet instantly followed! Thus, every one of the posse crouched behind his broncho using the body as breastworks and the little .44-40 calibre repeating saddle rifles returned a fierce fire over the horses' backs. Bullets pattered like hailstones against the shack door and windows! Several bronchos fell before the besieged's fire, the men ducking behind the prostrated beasts for protection.

"I reckon we're makin' it interestin' fer 'em jus' the same," remarked one, exultingly. "Look at the door thar— 'pears like it might let in a little ventilation!"

The monotonous crack of firearms and the patter of lead continued all day. The door and casing was literally shot to splinters; also the wooden shutters protecting the windows, and the adobe wall around them began to crumble a little. Clouds of smoke clung to the walls and arose in thin wisps.

"Speakin' 'bout bee-hives—oh, say!" grinned one of the posse with powder-stained lips.

"How 'bout smoked ham," grinned another. "I'd hate to be in that shack with that burnt powder. Jinks, the air is pallooted 'nough 'roun' us!" He glanced up at the heavy cloud of smoke overhead.

"Gee! it shore gives me an appetite, though!" declared a third. "Looks like we're a-goin' to work overtime tonight."

"My gun bar'll is hot enough to fry steak!" said the first. "Who wants a juicy slice?"

"Whiskey fer me! *I'm dry 'nough to chew gum!*" Then with a groan the speaker dropped face downward. The red stream was readily soaked up in the adobe dust. The others gazed silently at him and, with vindictive curses, they poured out their rage on the shack, working the levers of their smoking Winchesters with methodical precision! But, with defiant spurts of flame and smoke bullets hissed back at them from the building, sang their deadly tune on every side as they kicked up the dust in front, throwing it in the gritty mouths and grimy faces—to bury with a dull thud in a broncho's or a man's body, or glance with an angry hum overhead, wrenching from beast a wild shriek of agony and from man a constrained groan! Thus, the hot, weary hours of the afternoon dragged along. Still the posse relentlessly kept up the fight, caring not to reserve ammunition, which was constantly arriving, and being distributed with difficulty, owing to the unerring marksmanship of the besieged, who, too, were evidently well supplied for the occasion. Only a very hot rifle barrel put it temporarily out of commission.

Re-enforcements all day had joined the posse; gradually the circle growing stronger and more deadly. Consequently weaker grew the fire from the shack. Jack Morris ordered word to be passed around to cease shooting, thus allowing the weapons to cool in readiness for a sally from the shack.

"Wonder if Cap'n Kidd is still alive?" mused Harry Western at Jack Morris' left elbow.

"I was jus' a-wonderin' that myself, Kid," answered Jack. "I hope so. I've entertained him a hull lot; but I reckon this here is the bes' reception yet!"

A quarter of an hour elapsed, still no sign from the desperate garrison, and twilight was merging into darkness. "Say, Jack," called a young plainsman about ten yards from his left, "reckon we could charge 'em off 'n thar feet!"

"Better wait till dark," advised an old frontiersman a few feet from Jack's right. "They'll prob'bly try to break through us in the dark. But, we kin crawl up clost an' pepper 'em unmercifully the minute they shove thar noses out the door."

"That was my idee," said Jack. "An' now, we might 's well amuse ourselves while it's light by jus' remindin' 'em we're still here." Suiting the action to the word he sent a .45-90 calibre bullet crashing through the splintered door. Simultaneously the circle burst out into flame and smoke, pouring lead like hailstones into the adobe's apertures!

When darkness put an end to the firing, Jack turned to Harry and remarked, "Kid, if thar's a livin' soul yonder, he mus' be in the cave underneath."

"How you reckon will be the best way to git 'em out the cave?" Harry inquired. "Starvin' or chargin'?"

"I wouldn't keer to be the firs' feller to poke my face into the cave," grinned the old frontiersman.

Presently Jack Morris passed word to each side of him to creep toward the abode, and the circle warily drew closer, Jack cautiously crawled toward the door, straining his eyes for the least suspicious move in the darkness. Suddenly his Colt's leaped instinctively on a level with his right eye as through the door staggered a dark form. "Hold on thar!" he called sharply. But, for answer a bright spurt of flame flashed toward him, and he heard the wicked hiss of lead close to his right ear. Three or four more forms came out the doorway, firing wildly at the sharp bursts of fire; the hopeless outlaws would not give up, because to do so would mean to be hanged, and they preferred to fight. Thus, they continued to pull their triggers even as the rain of lead pierced them through and through, and death ended their worthless lives.

Then the firing of the circle became so intense that a number of casualties occurred to the posse at its own hands. Hence, Jack Morris ordered it to cease, and in a loud, stern voice he commanded the survivors to surrender at once. It was almost two minutes before they appeared: five weaponless, begrimed and exhausted desperadoes. Instantly they were surrounded by an angry throng which grasped and tore with violent hand.

"Whar's Apache Kidd? Whar's Apache Kidd?" demanded threatening voices.

"He ain't here," one of the desperadoes replied. "Ain't be'n here fer two days."

"Not in the 'dobe?" gasped the frustrated throng. "Not in the 'dobe? Whar is he?"

"With Frenchie Brosseau. They was workin' the bank together."

The throng stared helplessly around; then unutterable rage seized it.

Jack Morris spoke in a low tone to a few men near him, and they rushed recklessly into the adobe to ascertain the cruel truth. Promptly the adobe filled with passionate men, searching every nook and corner for the hated renegade. But nowhere could he be discovered, and the baffled plainsmen gave vent to their wrath with furious curses. They completely overturned everything, and in their irascible mood they trampled over the dead and the wounded like so many cattle in a stampede.

Finally Jack Morris succeeded in clearing the adobe of the mob, to allow a few to continue the search in good order. "See if someone kain't find somethin' to make a light," he said; "we 've got a perty mess to clean up in here."

With the aid of matches the men continued the hunt. In the feeble light the interior presented a ghastly sight; dead and wounded lay scattered on the floor; also, firearms, belts, and other paraphernalia. The adobe walls without, as well as within, gave evidence of the terrible storm of lead poured upon them; flattened bullets nearly covered the ground, and the floor within was strewn with empty cartridge shells, showing, too, how heavy a fire had the garrison returned. In the centre of the room stood an empty barrel. Apparently it had held drinking water for the thirsty fighters, but, punctured by bullets, it had lost its precious contents. Near the barrel was an upturned table, and the burst cartridge boxes lying around suggested it had been used for the purpose of a convenient ammunition stand. The legs showed several bullet holes, as did all the scant furniture—in fact, the entire interior was a ruin.

In his eagerness to find the entrance to the cave, Jack Morris was so absorbed that he failed to notice the merciless treatment of the wounded prisoners at the vengeful hands of his men; thus, more than one helpless outlaw received a death blow from the heavy butts of big six-shooters and sank noiselessly down to join the never-waking sleep of their late comrades. The corpses were thrown roughly in a heap in a corner of the room.

Stumbling recklessly around the debris, Jack Morris groped his way, often forgetting the match which would burn to his finger tips, and with an angry exclamation he would throw it down, leaving himself without immediate light. Impatiently he would strike another match and resume the search.

Harry Western thoughtfully gathered up some splinters and kindled a small fire in the fireplace. More wood was brought and the fire soon lit up the dingy place, contributing a fair means to extend the search. 'You've got a head on you, Kid," praised Jack Morris, and Harry Western colored slightly with pleasure.

But, nothing more appeared. "I reckon thar ain't even a cockroach alive," remarked an old borderman presently. "Cap'n Kidd has shore played 'Yankee Doodle' with us ag'in, an' I s'pose we might's well deespose of his valiant men an' hit the back trail, like a kyute-licked hound."

"Them prisoners goes with us to town," quietly answered Jack Morris.

Green understood the declaration. "They do, do they? Wall, not after our neck-tie sociable," he insinuated vindictively.

"We don't want any lynchin', boys," said Jack. "Let the law deal with 'em."

"We're the law what runs this here range," retorted Green, glancing around on the taciturn countenances. "If any of Apache Kidd's gang don't deeserve lynchin'—wall, I've missed my guess, I reckon." He started toward the door. At once several voices affirmed his statement and a general movement followed.

"Boys!" implored Jack, hurrying after them. However, they would not listen to him.

Meanwhile, the plainsmen had been none too peaceable toward the prisoners, and it needed only a spark to start the flame. Hence, when Green appeared he promptly prevailed upon them to deal out range law, and at once a ferocious mob burst into the adobe after the captives to fulfill the lust for blood.

Jack Morris elbowed his way into the surging throng, knowing too well that the enraged plainsmen would work vengeance with that identical spirit which predominated in all cases like Apache Kidd's—although lynching itself, responding to the plainsmen's uncontrollable spirit, is also lawless, and he endeavored to reason with the men to cool down and respect the written law. But, the plainsmen had been aroused to such frenzy by Apache Kidd's misdeeds that, in the desire for vengeance, they became so distracted in mind and body as to lose all regard for written law and sought to carry out their purpose. In the early days the West—boasting of no jails—lynched outlaws. When the written law was introduced "the old dogs" could not "savvy" it, and they clung to the old methods. Hence, the conflict with the progressive generation—"the young dogs"—which learned from books that it were better to give up "the bone" to justice, knowing that it would be treated according to its deserts. Thus, "the old dogs" sprang, growling, for their "bones."

Besides their past outlawry, the clan had wounded and killed a number of the present posse and they must now pay the penalty. Jack and a few faithful followers struggled to protect the captured renegades from the bristling pack, which completely surrounded them with angry curses and savage blows. It would have been utter folly for Jack and his little band to have used their fire-arms in defense, as in such a predicament the mob would not have tolerated them. Likewise, what chance had they against such overwhelming numbers attacking from every quarter? Strong and determined as Jack and his party were, the terrible pace soon began to tell on them, and after putting up a manly fight, they were overpowered, bound and carried outside.

Green drew the end of a rawhide lariat over a cottonwood roof beam. His purpose was easy to divine. Within the semi-circle of luridly lit faces, gathered around the fire, stood the five condemned desperadoes, awaiting their doom. When a victim would be "strung up" it would bring him very near the leaping flames, thus adding something more terrible to the scene. But no matter, the place was the only available gallows, and consequently the execution would maliciously proceed.

Harry Western, seeing the mob interested in the forthcoming incident, took advantage of the opportunity and dexterously cut the rope which bound Jack. As Jack arose to stretch his cramped limbs, Harry also freed the others. Then the little party joined the grim circle. Jack again tried to wedge a passage through to the center, but the jam held together with irresistible strength, crowding the men until they seemed to gasp for breath, as they were almost lifted off their feet. The air was stifling, causing the perspiration to appear in large beads on the swarthy faces. To penetrate such a wall of excited human beings was nigh impossible; yet Jack endeavored to force his way through to confront the leaders. His efforts were unsuccessful and he madly ran around the semi-circle, looking for a weak place. The cries of "Lynch 'em! Lynch 'em!" and the labored breathing of struggling men in the crush spurred him to the fight, and again he attacked the press only to come once more in contact with that violent pressure. Many a curse was hurled at him as his elbow or shoulder struck home; but he paid no attention, but pushed ahead. He paid no heed to the blows struck at him, as, the space being limited, they carried little force against his well protected head. Then curses followed in long, fluent strings. Groans and curses arose here and there where corns were trampled upon. The dusty mob presented a wild sight as it sluggishly swayed to and fro, wild-eyed, bloody, scratched faces, dishevelled hair, missing hats, torn clothes, pushing, crowding, jamming, cursing, threatening. The leaders called to move back and give more space. Presently Green opened the fatal noose to slip it over the nearest bandit's head.

To rise above the crowd and make himself universally heard, Jack climbed the pile of dead bodies in the corner and shouted, "Boys, give 'em to me." Green told him to mind his own business. "Who found 'em?" Jack challenged.

"Thet don't make no difference," replied Green: "We're a-goin' to swing 'em," and he coolly placed the noose over the victim's head.

"If you do, gentlemen," warned Jack, "I'll never hunt down another."

"Don't you worry, son," retorted Green, drawing the noose taut, "we kin take keer of ourselves."

"I reckon you'd better ask Cap'n 'bout that," taunted Jack.

"Wall, why don't you ketch him, son," sneered Green.

"Well," answered Jack, glancing around the crowd, "I have done somethin' that a-way. Who gave you this splendid opportunity, anyway? Who found this here den? Is it my fault the fox didn't happen to be in? Is it? An' I reckon, instead of wastin' our time here, it would be better hittin' his trail."

"We kain't do it afore daylight," remarked one of the crowd. "How kin we foller a trail in the dark?"

"Then we orter look fer somethin' to eat an' then git a little sleep to be ready at daybreak," Jack suggested.

"Say," called Green, "you didn't mind lynchin' them rustlers over Wagon Mound way, did you? What's the odds?"

"I've learned to respect the law," Jack answered. "It's just as lawless to take these men's lives without a trial by jury as it was fer 'em to rob the bank."

"They've done more than rob—they've even killed some of us!"

"Well, won't the court remember that? They'll be punished."

"Ain't we the cou't? Kain't we do it jus' as well?"

"Not upholdin' the majesty of the law."

"The law. What law? Ain't our law always be'n the bes' judgment of the community? Kain't we judge these critters here as well as in town? What're you talkin' bout, I'd like to know."

"Well," concluded Jack, "I'll wash my hands of this, an' all other cases in the future. After this, you kin find yore own game to lynch." And he stepped down from the ghastly platform.

"Apache Kidd is bad medicine—eh?" sneered Green. "Jack knows when it's time to quit. He don't want to corral the Kidd 'cause he's afraid we'll lynch him. That's shore rich. Haw! Haw! Haw!"

No matter how wicked the place there is

always someone to stand up, unafraid, for the right. The courage of Jack Morris to back his ideal served to arouse respect for law and order. Thus, an old cattleman stepped up to Green and said, "I've knowed Jack Morris fer a good spell an' he's all wool." There was a short silence, and then a cheer burst forth from the inner ring of the circle. The old cattleman continued, "If thar's 'nother man in this here part of the United States of Ameriky who's done more fore elevatin' society, I'd like some feller to mention him right now."

"Thet's all right," said Green. "But, didn't these here critters kill some of us this very day? Why not hang 'em up at once an' be done with it? That's whut."

" 'Cause we ain't the cou't, gentlemen," replied the old cattleman. "Let the law deal with 'em. Fer one, I'm plumb ashamed of this thing, an' I heartily endorse Jack Morris's sentiments. If his reputation ain't of any value to us, then he orter, as he's threatened, to give up his services.

"But, on t'other han', if we do value his services, we'll beg him to continue his good work. Apache Kidd is at large, an' whoever has landed him yet, but Jack?"

"Shore," interrupted Green, "an' if Jack had lynched the Kidd at once instead of givin' him up to the law, we wouldn't be troubled no longer. As it is, Cap'n Kidd has be'n makin' fools of us right along?"

"The law would've hanged the Kidd all right," answered the old cattleman, "but some fools tried to take him 'way an' lynch him. Durin' the argument with the sheriff the Kidd escaped—you all know how it happened. Was it Jack's fault? No siree. Not at all.

"Now, Colonel Maxwell—one of the fines' men who ever threw a leg over a saddle—has worked hard for years to establish the law in this here risin' community. What do you do to help him? Send his bes' man away—the bes' bandit-hunter we ever had the good fortune to have? God ferbid, gentlemen.

"Believe me, what Jack says he'll do, he'll do. An' I shore know Jack. So, listen to reason, an' trot these fellers to jail. The jury won't fergit what they've done, an' some of us will be on the jury. The rest will be at the trial, an' if the jury don't do right, we'll be thar all right."

A swift murmur arose among the crowd. The fair-minded citizens realized the true state of affairs, and instead of the vengeful lust for blood, they grasped the situation and respected the law. Of course the assembly still contained a number of skeptical ones, who grumbled their confounded doubts; but these were entirely obliterated under the compelling force of the law-abiding majority.

"Say, Jack," said one, near the outer edge of the circle, "I'll bet you didn't know you was so influential!"

To command a regiment of well-trained soldiers and to govern a multitude of self-appointed angry "range-law" plainsmen are two very different propositions. However, the adobe was finally cleared of the crowd, and only the prisoners, guarded by two resolute rangers, remained within.

Outside a campfire burned and most of the men lay on the bare earth, endeavoring to catch a few hours' sleep. At daybreak they knew that they would find most of the horses dead or wounded. A long walk was before them; hence, it were wise to reserve strength. Although many of the saddle-bags contained a snack to eat, the men cared now more for rest than for food. Thus, peace settled over the battle-ground, tranquility reigned, except for the low mutterings of the wounded, and the mournful moans of the coyotes, scenting fresh spilled blood!

Jack Morris and Harry Western, exhausted as they were, valiantly attended the wounded, doing all in their power to relieve the suffering of both man and beast. Even after daybreak they remained faithfully at their post. Finally, the old cattleman insisted that they "turn in" and leave it to some of the slightly refreshed men. Thus, while Jack and Harry slept, preparations methodically continued.

Upon awakening Jack stiffly arose and gazed around the adobe—it was occupied now by the wounded who were carried in for shelter from the sun's burning rays. Several men moved about, attending them. But the five prisoners were not there. Jack involuntarily rubbed his eyes and silently stared. What did it all mean? Were they taken out and lynched? The thought of the possibility caused the blood to grow hot within his veins and he reviled himself for being so weak as to allow such trickery. Therefore without making inquiry, he pushed irritably past the attendants and went out. Men moved about with quiet dignity; a few groups squatted peaceably on the hot sand, playing cards as sociably as if in the grandest drawing room; others were stripping their dead horses of their saddles and accoutrements, while overhead lazily sailed hideous buzzards. Jack leaned against the door-jamb in deep study. He was aroused by the voice of Green: "Wall," the speaker continued as Jack silently contemplated him; "yore friends was taken to town."

"The bandits?" Jack asked, with increasing interest.

"Shore. The ol' cattleman took 'em to the sher'ff. He's also gone fer hosses fer us an' vehicles fer the wounded. If he'll unly git a rustle on him mebbe thar won't be a full house at the trial."

"Of course," affirmed Jack, "we'll be thar to see that they git the fulles' extent of the law."

"Wall, I reckon!" exclaimed Green. "Moses an' all the prophets won't hol' a candle to us—not by a dern sight."

As Jack and Harry were preparing their meager breakfast, the latter smiled and said, "Reckon the Colonel's daughter will pat you on the back."

"Fer what, Kid?"

"Why—" Harry replied, "fer everythin'! Just think what you've done. I shore won't have a look in now."

Jack's spirits had been rising rapidly and he was in a very comfortable frame of mind. "Kid," he grinned, "you shore are an easy rival—you are. Why, if I had half yore grit I would have merried her long ago. But, the funniest part of the deal—the more us rivals associate the more we grow to like each other. Now, how do you reckon it will turn out?"

"You got me," Harry confessed.

"It shore is a tough proposition."

"Ain't it," sighed Harry. "Sometimes I think it ain't a square deal—you're so big an' strong, while I'm so blamed little."

"Yes—but when thar's two women to one man in this big, big world, tell me, Kid, why does every girl have two lovers? It's always so. I had the same thing happen to me at Wagon Mound. I fell in love with Bill Upton's wife—that is, before she was—an' somehow, he won out. She was a lovely Eastern girl."

"She an' Mr. Upton seem to think a heap of you," Harry interrupted. Jack remained in silent recollection. "It seems to me," Harry added, "that when a big, handsome feller saves a gal's life, an' then helps out her daddy, he shouldn't be so very ticklish 'bout a no account kid like me."

Jack believed he discovered a little moisture gathering in those large brown eyes, and gently laying his hand on Harry's arm, he said, "Kid, speakin' of 'no account', I sometimes feel that a-way myself."

"You, Jack?"

" 'Bout the only thing that keeps me straight is my sister, Clara. You know what our—well—I s'pose I'll have to call him 'father'—"

"Jack," said Harry, "let's not talk of him now. We've got to find that money stolen from the bank."

Jack quickly straightened. "That's right, Kid! An' after that—Cap'n Kidd I reckon when he saw Brosseau 'bout to confess to me in the bank, he shot him through the door, but the aim was so fast he thought mebbe the Frenchman wouldn't be killed outright an' would tell of this hidin' place—which he did. So, the foxy Kidd didn't return here to give his gang the alarm, but hid near the bank somewhars till night, an' while we demoralized his famous clan, unmolested, he vamosed the deserted town."

After a short silence, Harry said, "Thar's one thing I've be'n a-tryin' to figger out: What has become of Mrs. Brosseau?"

"I've be'n thinkin' of that, too. Say! do you reckon they're in the cave?" With sudden inspiration Jack walked quickly into the adobe, approached a bunk, pulled off the blankets and carefully examined the bottom. Discovering nothing material he likewise searched the next, and the next. Then he bent closer with an exultant exclamation. "Look, Kid!" he added. Pulling up a loose board forming part of the bunk bottom, he peered through. Excitedly he pulled out three more loose boards, and there, in the floor, was disclosed a trap door!

The attendants gathered around. "Git a few fellers to help," Jack ordered. "Thar's liable to be rats below!" He cautiously raised the covering. "Hey you, down thar!" he called. "Come up!" There was no response. "In three minutes we'll burn you out!" Still no answer. As Jack gave instructions for "the smoker", a muffled voice below was heard

"Hello, down thar!" Again the voice sounded. "It's a female—reckon it's Mrs. Brosseau! Hello, Mrs. Brosseau! Anybody else down thar with you?"

"No, Monsieur Sheriff," Mrs. Brosseau replied.

Before anyone could interfere Harry Western sprang recklessly down the ladder. "Kid! Kid!" called Jack. "Come back, Kid, it might be a trick!" However, Harry landed safely. Quickly the others scrambled after him. Mrs. Brosseau was helped to the room above.

"Mos' of the gang's paraphernalia's here," said Harry, surveying the underground room. "Gee, they shore had a good stock of grub! An' them bags look like gold mines to me!"

"Thar's enough yaller boys to pay back the Colonel's loss, I reckon!" Jack jubilantly exclaimed. And they continued the search.

At once the news spread around camp, inducing great excitement, and the entrance was jammed with curious plainsmen.

"Hey, Jack," called one, "the Colonel an' his darter is here an' wants to see you. They're a-comin' down."

Jack met them at the bottom of the rough ladder.

"Hail the conqueror!" proudly smiled May, proffering her ungloved hand.

Jack took it somewhat embarrassed, and said, "Why—what are you a-doin' here?"

"She would come!" explained the Colonel.

And the pretty smile May gave Jack increased his agitation so, that, brown as were his sun-tanned cheeks, he felt that the hot blood rushing to them must surely betray his feelings. Hence, he invited them to behold "the missing gold!"

"Just think what you have done for the Colonel," May admiringly declared, smiling so sweetly that Jack felt uncomfortable.

"You shore have done it, Jack," warmly complimented the Colonel.

"Apache Kidd ain't here," Jack despondently answered.

"That's right, Jack," May reproved, "be discouraged at the time of your greatest triumph! Haven't you broken up that notorious clan!"

CHAPTER XXI

"WHY SHOULD I MARRY A RICH DUCK FROM THE STATES?"

The Maxwell home ranch bell had rung to quit work, and soon the boys would come trooping in to get ready for supper, when the bell would ring again, announcing that the meal was awaiting them.

Hank was filling a bucket at the pump and singing softly to himself.

"Hank," Betsy called from the mess-house door, "be you a-goin' to take all night to fill that bucket?"

"Wall, who's a-doin this? Me or you?" Hank retorted.

"You're always a-goin' roun' with a chip on yore shoulder!" she fussed.

"You're always a-tryin' to knock it off," he teased.

"Here, here, here!" said Jack, coming around the house, "what's all this?" He pulled up his broncho.

"Oh," said Betsy, her face becoming all smiles, "good evenin', Mr. Jack!"

"Well, I'll be gosh durned!" Hank exclaimed, with uprising jealousy. How differently she always treated Jack.

"Supper perty near ready, Betsy?" Jack asked. "I'm hungry as a flea!"

"That's why I was scoldin' Hank," she replied. "It takes him all night to git a bucket of water."

"Git us some good supper, Betsy," said Jack, " 'cause it's the last square meal we'll have fer a month to come."

About twenty of the boys entered the barnyard, and most of them went directly to the pump. Jack walked toward the stable.

"Say, fellers," said Green, "this yere Jack Morris a-lords it over us, jus' 'cause he saved the Colonel's darter, whilst us poor devils must do all the dirty work! Jack's got a cinch on us an' we've got to do what he says!"

"This ain't the only ranch," said Hank, "an' if youse fellers don't like the boss, thar's no law as fer as I kin see, to make you stay here."

"Listen to the ol' woman talkin'," said Green sarcastically.

"When you come on this ranch," said Hank, "we didn't ask no questions; but don't think 'cause you've worked here a leetle while, you own the hull outfit."

"Soak 'm! Go fer 'm, Hank! Knock the win' out of 'm! Hank, soak 'im!" the crowd yelled, vociferously.

"Aw, soak yore foot!" Hank taunted, and he went into the house.

"Ha! ha! ha!" the boys laughed.

"What's the matter with the ol' woman?" Bill asked.

"He's all right!" they replied.

"Who's all right?"

"The ol' woman!"

Hank poked his head out of the window. "What's the matter with youse fellers? All gone crazy? You think you're a-goin' to make a fool out of me, don't you? The hull push of you are cock-roaches!"

"Say, Hank," jeered Green, "what was yore maiden name in Kansas?"

"It's none of yore darn business!"

"Listen at the ol' woman ravin'," said Green, "like some ol' Greaser."

"By gum, Green," Hank exclaimed, "a greaser is a d—n coward, an' so're you."

Green drew his six-shooter.

"Shut up, Green. Don't shoot. It was your fault: you made 'im mad. He ain't armed. You made 'im mad—it was your fault," said the crowd.

"I hain't got my 'gun'," said Hank, "an' if you're fool enough to fire on an unarmed man, shoot an' be—"

They heard Betsy's voice in the house. "Hank," she said, coming up behind him, "if you swear 'nuther word, I'll pour this tea-kittle of boilin' water down your throat."

Hank jumped out the window.

"Green," said Red Nose Bill, "bet you drinks. Betsy kin bluff you, too."

"Well—a boilin' tea-kittle ain't no match fer a 'gun'," Green grinned.

"What's the matter with youse fellers?" Betsy called from the window. "You act like a pack of Injuns. You don't git no supper till you kin act decent."

"Oh, Betsy," said Red Nose Bill, "my stomach's a-turnin' flip-flops with hunger. I'll be good right now."

"We'll all be good," said another, "won't we, fellers?"

Betsy came out, took hold of the rope of the bell on the house, and rang the bell—the second bell for supper.

"Say, fellers," said Red Nose Bill, "fall in line, put yore han's on the feller's shoulders in front of you an' we'll march in the house singin' Hank's song 'bout Betsy."

They formed into position, and marched into the grub-house all singing:

" 'Sweet Betsy Ann, sweet Betsy Ann,
Sweet Betsy Ann from Kansas—
An' when she drops her big dark eyes,
My heart jumps high with joy, an' cries:
'Sweet Betsy Ann, sweet Betsy Ann,
Sweet Betsy Ann, I love you.' "

Hank stood in the stable door, a dark frown on his face.

"They're jus' a-tryin' thar bes' to git you mad. I wouldn't let 'em git the bes' of me. Don't you min' 'em an' they'll soon quit," advised Betsy. "Now you go along to supper an' don't pay any attention to 'em; don't give 'em any satisfaction." She took his arm and together they went in.

May Maxwell rode toward the stable, just as Jack stepped out of the door.

"Be'n out riding?" he smiled.

"I have been exercising my 'inspiration' again, as well as my physical powers."

"Fall in any more quicksand holes? Anybody who gits such an inspiration as to forgit where she's a-goin' needs a guard to ride with her to always be ready to give assistance."

"I'm afraid I couldn't get anyone to accept the job."

"Couldn't you? I'm lookin' fer such a job."

"You? I thought you were 'drive boss'?"

"I am; but I'd rather stay here."

"May I ask why?"

"Oh—grub's better. Hank an' I have made a bargain; 'If I git Betsy to merry me, he gits her; if he gits her to merry 'im, I gits her'."

"My! Think of the opportunity for rivalry. Who will woo the harder? But won't you come over to the house for supper, Jack?" May invited. "Now don't make excuses but come along."

"But, you see—"

"No, I don't. Why don't you say that you don't want to come?"

"Oh, but I do!"

"We'll be late if you don't hurry."

"Will we?"

"Have to eat a cold supper."

"Couldn't we warm it?"

"We—might not find anything to warm."

"Ha! ha! ha! Wouldn't that be a joke!" Jack laughed.

"A joke! Not in my present state."

"Hungry?"

"I'm nearly starved!"

"So am I. Could eat clods."

They heard the men laughing in the dining-hall. "The boys are makin' the bes' of their las' night on the ranch."

"How long will you be gone on the drive this time?" May asked, after a short pause.

" 'Bout six weeks," Jack sighed. "It'll seem six years to me."

He walked to the pump and filled the tin cup with water. "We don't git much better water than this on the plains. Give me the pure, col' water to quench the burnin' thirst. What tastes better after a hard day's work, than this sparklin' liquid? So drink, Jack, drink— drink to yore heart's content; you've signed no pledge so have naught to repent. 'Tis many a day afore I kin git such stuff—See the sunset.

Glorious! See the golden West! Ah, don't it warm yore heart to see it at its best?"

"You should have been a poet."

"If you kain't say anything nice 'bout a feller, don't say anythin' at all."

"Honest praise can hurt no one," smiled May.

Jack was kicking the clod of adobe which lay at his feet, and May was watching him. "Penny for your thoughts," she said, after a silence.

"My thoughts? H'm—guess I'm homesick already. I don't hanker much after drinkin' out of mud-holes with dead carcasses lyin' in 'em—mind, I'm not complainin'. I'd rather stay here an' eat apple-pies an'—be near you," he smiled.

"Near me?" she said softly, with assumed surprise.

"Shore. How lonesome the plains will seem! I'll be jus' achin' to git back. Tomorrow mornin' we'll be on the drive at day-break, an' it'll be a long time afore I see you ag'in. Lots o' things might happen afore then. You might git another 'inspiration' an' drown in a mudhole. Or you might git married to some rich duck from the states."

"No fear of that. I'm a western product, and I have no desire to live in a lovely mansion in the states. I shall never marry for money."

"Do you mean what you say?"

"My father will see that I am well fixed when I marry the right man, and why should I 'marry a rich duck from the states'?"

"Have you seen yore 'right man'?"

"Somewhere in this country there is a man I am waiting for, and when we meet, two lives will be happy."

"He'll be a lucky duck."

"No more than I. The best thing that could happen to any girl is to find her mate."

"How does a feller know who is the right one?" Jack questioned.

"You feel it; you know it! I can't tell how; but there is a strong natural instinct which draws two hearts together."

"Then," said he, "marriage isn't a lottery is it?"

"Events very often unite two lives."

"You mean when a feller's saved a girl's life, an' he loves her, he's got the right to ask her to merry him ? Would you merry a feller like me?"

The young plainsman was unversed in ways of gallantry, but at such moments heart speaks to heart with a language all love's own. "You are dearer to me than all the world beside," he said simply.

"Are you sure you are making no mistake?" she smiled, blushing prettily.

"Dead shore," he cried as he kissed her fondly. "I have always loved you—from the first!"

"Jack, see the west; the sky is a glowing yellow fire with the after-shine of the sunset!" she exclaimed, radiant in the gorgeous light.

Jack's clasp tightened: "So is my heart, May!' he smiled. "It's plumb full of sunshine!" And he lovingly kissed the happy, smiling lips.

CHAPTER XXII

"THE HIGHER NATURE OF MAN"

As the day was breaking with the first faint glimmer of sunrise, Jack Morris stepped out of the low adobe stable doorway, leading a saddle-horse by the bridle. It was too dark within to see to do a good job of grooming. Jack let the reins hang from the bit to the ground, and the well-trained broncho stood as if hitched to a post as its master put on the finishing touches with the brush. Presently Jack stepped back and critically examined the work. Then, with a pat, he leaned against the horse and a feeling of pride came over him, as he thought of himself as a boss of one of the largest cattle-ranches in the United States.

The Colonel was in debt for the saving of May's life, and this fact, together with the young man's sterling qualities, which the Colonel's keen business instinct had not failed to discover, had caused the big cattleman to make Jack a foreman, and a bright future lay before him. Why should he not feel contented and proud? He walked briskly to the old wooden pump and drank. Again he filled the rusty tin cup, but this time it paused before his lips, and he contemplated the well-ordered adobe buildings. Beyond, he knew, the cattle grazed on a vast, green, rolling region of wealth! The Maxwell Land Grant, being a little empire in itself, contained mines of coal, gold, silver and iron, forests of timber, and thousands of acres of grazing land. Among the foot-hills was found the cinnamon bear, the clear mountain streams were alive with trout; in the broad, beautiful parks on the mesas above were deer, grouse and wild turkey. This was a country fit for a king! And Jack was to become part owner. Only last evening he had become engaged to the Colonel's daughter—Jack's eyes closed and his breast tingled! Was it true, or was he only dreaming?

The measured beats of a horse's hoofs upon the adobe road aroused him from his reverie. He turned and beheld his sweetheart! With a joyful exclamation, he dropped the cup and ran toward her.

"Good morning, dear," she smiled.

Jack grasped the proffered hand, drew the rider to him, and kissed her again and again.

"Jack, dear," she warned, "be careful, someone may be looking!"

"Kain't help it," he replied, "you inspire me so!"

They heard the approach of a horse, but so taken up were they with each other, that Jack had just time to release his sweetheart's hand before a tall rider appeared around the corner of the mess-house. Upon suddenly discovering the confused lovers, he sharply pulled up his broncho, which caused the well-trained animal to fall back upon its haunches. "Oh, excuse me," said Ed Maxwell, raising his big sombrero, "I didn't expect to—to see you here."

"Mornin', Ed," Jack greeted, also uncovering. "Goin' fer a ride?"

"That's what we started out fer. But, I reckon May would jus' as soon stay here as ride with her brother."

"Why, Ed," May protested, because his words implied too plainly that she preferred Jack's company to his, "I was only waiting for you to catch up."

"Aw! my fool of a broncho got to actin' frisky, an' it took me several minutes to quiet him," Ed explained. "But if you're ready, I am."

"All right! You'll excuse me, Jack?" she turned and smiled sweetly.

"Shore thing. Have a good time," he casually replied, because they had agreed that their engagement was to be a secret.

"Thank you," she smiled again, and rode away.

"Doesn't Ed act queer over his sister?" thought Jack as he walked toward the stable door. "Wonder if he's jealous of me?"

A few feet distant May reined up her horse and turned toward Ed, who, instead of following her had remained behind and was watching Jack entering the stable.

"Aren't you coming, Ed?" May asked presently.

"No, I reckon I won't go ridin' this mornin'," Ed replied ill-humoredly.

"Why? Just because you saw me talking to Jack?"

He played with the reins a few seconds in silence. There is human nature even in a cowboy. It may be made up of distinct parts, with a variety of kind and quality, consisting not only of one particular vice or virtue, but it is a combination of qualities developed by his environment. Take the civilized world over, man's individual nature is two-fold: the lower, or animal, and the higher, or intellectual. These two aggressive powers are constantly at war, striving to gain possession of man's character, the quality of which is fashioned and moulded by the dictates of the victor.

May did not know what was passing through her brother's mind; but he soon dismounted, walked up to her horse and stroked its glossy neck as he disclosed to her his thoughts: "Do you know that I'm not your real brother?" he asked.

"What!" she exclaimed, apparently unable to comprehend the full meaning of his words.

"Did you ever suspect that I was not your real brother?" he repeated.

"You not my brother?"

"I'm not. Your father adopted me," said Ed, still stroking the horse's neck. "I kin well remember the days we played together. We were little children—them were happy days; everything was sunshine!" He paused a moment: those happy days of childhood were delightful to look back upon. But his mind traveled rapidly as it took in the swift changes of life and it soon brought him back to his present stage. With an earnest smile, he quickly raised his eyes to the girl on the horse, and exclaimed, impetuously, "May, I love you! Will you be my wife? Will you make me happier still?"

The suddenness quite naturally took her breath away; but quickly recovering from the surprise, she hesitatingly answered, "I—Ed—I can only love you as a sister."

The suitor's expression instantly changed and he demanded, "Why not as a wife?" A subtle jealousy sprang up within his breast. "You love another! Oh! this is a hard blow! All these years I've loved you. Are you engaged?"

"Yes," she answered, very low.

"To whom?"

"We're keeping it a secret."

"Tell me," he insisted. "Oh, I know: it's Jack!—May—I've watched you grow up from a little gal—we've grown up together an' we know each other's faults an' good points. I've watched you blossom from a little gal into a stately woman, an' my love grew very slow an' is deep-rooted an' it kain't be blown away by a light wind—but—it must be dashed to pieces and utterly destroyed!"

"Ed!" she rebuked.

The purpose was evident. This time the man's higher nature was thrown on the defensive by the terrible aggressiveness of the lower nature, which certainly threatened the entire possession of his character. And thus the flesh spoke: "Of course, everyone can't be lucky enough to save yore life!"

"Do you suppose that is the reason I am to marry Jack?" proudly retorted the girl.

"Oh, I know!" he said hotly. "What right has he to interfere with us anyway?"

"He asked me first."

"But I had first claim. You're jus' back from college an'—"

"Am I to be staked out like a mine claim?" she proudly demanded.

"I felt you were mine all the time. Now yore affections are stolen away!" he cried, half dropping his right hand toward his right thigh.

May was a thoroughbred Western girl, and knew the meaning of that movement, and so she endeavored to pacify him. "Ed, you must take it coolly," she declared.

"Coolly," he repeated, bitterly. "How kin I when my breast's on fire? Have I no rights? You've been away from home so long—"

"You can't blame me, nor anyone else. You know the circumstances—stand your loss like a man."

Ed muttered something through his compressed teeth about "Circumstances altering the case." Then he said, "I'm not a-goin' ridin' this mornin'."

"Come, Ed, you mustn't act so foolishly."

"I kain't help it! You don't savvy how I feel. Shall I take you to the house?"

"No, thank you. I'll go alone. When you can behave a little better than a spoiled child I shall be pleased to finish our ride. But not in your present humor." And May rode away, leaving Ed standing there to think it over.

Jack came out of the stable doorway carrying his big saddle. The broncho saw it, and immediately became the image of dejection. When Jack threw on the heavy seat, it did not in the least change the forlorn expression. But when the horse felt the cinch tightening, he drew air into his lungs to their fullest capacity, then on the sly exhaled, leaving the cinch very loose.

This trick often amuses and irritates the horseman. But Jack was not to be fooled, and as he drew hard at the forward cinch he placed his right foot against the broncho's body to brace himself, and fairly made the brute grunt. Jack's back was toward Ed, who saw his chance! On the impulse of the moment he jerked out his six-shooter and aimed it at his unsuspecting rival. For a second his finger hesitated on the trigger. It was a most dramatic moment! But Ed did not fire. He placed the deadly weapon back in its holster and turned away.

Was he a murderer at heart? No! The cowardly act had been the result of an uncontrollable passion kindled by the coals of disappointment.

As Jack was about to mount, the broncho became alive on the instant! "Goin' to pitch?" Jack chuckled. "Whoa, you ol' fool! That's right! you wall-eyed son-of-misery! Pitch! Whoa!" He turned and saw Ed standing alone. "What, ain't you a-goin' ridin'?"

"No," Ed replied crossly.

"Hope I didn't make any trouble, because I wasn't goin' with you, anyway," Jack explained.

After a silence, Ed confessed, "I've been a coward!"

"A coward? If Ed Maxwell's a coward, I'd hate to have to fight a hero!" laughed Jack.

Such higher nature as Ed's cannot be spoiled by praise. "I am, Jack, a coward!" he bitterly exclaimed, "a miserable coward! I'm not Ed Maxwell in reality, but I'm only adopted as such—"

"No! It's a fable!" gasped Jack, hardly believing his ears.

"It's the truth."

"Well—how does that make you a coward?"

"I asked May to be my wife, an'— she loves you! When you was cinchin' yore saddle, with yore back toward me, I was tempted to kill you."

"Kill me?"

"Shore; from behind!"

"Ed," said Jack, putting out his hand, "is it fair play?"

Ed was struggling with a fierce passion, but he crowded it beneath the higher nature of man, and accepted his rival's proffered hand. "Yes, it will be fair play, Jack."

Jack was perfectly aware of the jealous nature he would have to deal with in the future, and he desired to have a better understanding. "Ed," said he, "we both love May, but both kain't merry her. One of us must lose, but which one?"

The question acted on Ed's passionate nature like oil on a fire. "Which one!" he burst out, dropping his right hand on his Colt's. "S'pose some day they found yore bones on the prairie!"

"Ed, you wouldn't do so cowardly a thing as to kill me in cold blood?" Jack answered disdainfully. "An' if you try to kill me fairly, I reckon I kin take care of myself!"

A bad temper very often breaks out only to learn that it is wholly unsupported and if taken advantage of, what is the result? It falls a victim to a greater force, which coolly appoints the time and applies the original laws of man's higher nature. This higher nature in one individual will overrun the lower nature in another, as certain characters charm the vicious animals of the lower kingdom. The stronger mind has influence over the weaker. And how weak, how very weak, is a bad temper!

Ed saw the evil but not the remedy, and thus he confessed a greater weakness. "I wouldn't trust myself, if you merried her an' I'd have a chance to use this—"

"Jus' the same, Ed, I'm a-goin' to merry her."

"You are!" The Colt's leaped from its holster.

"Put yore 'gun' back," smiled Jack disdainfully.

"No, you'll have to fight fer her!"

"You've got the drop on me."

"We'll stan' back to back, and step off fifteen paces—then turn an' fire!"

"You know my shot," Jack warned, and Ed knew that the man before him had the reputation of the deadliest shot in all the Southwest.

"You might's well kill me as take her from me," said Ed, respectfully acknowledging Jack's reputation. But a nature of Ed's temperament does not consider either life or death in such a case; so it demanded the animal's method of settling the dispute: to fight! "Draw!" he ordered. "She's life to me, an' if you take her you'll have to take me, too!"

"I reckon neither one of us will miss at thirty yards," said Jack; "it'll be an easy hip-shot, an' plunk! There'll be two crazy fools for the devil. An' say, if we're both killed she'll merry some other feller! Wouldn't that be great!"

"Say, I kain't stan' fer that," said Ed. "Kin you?"

"I guess not. Tell you what we'll do, ol' man, we'll play poker an' the winner gits her.

It'll save both our lives an' no blood spilt. You see, Ed, if one of us happened to escape injury in a duel, he would be in danger of the law, an' though he won her—but I'm afraid May wouldn't merry a man with blood on his soul—he couldn't live in peace. Poker's better than gun-play."

"Then let it be poker," said Ed. There was a finer trait in him than his sentence implied. But the quality of his higher nature—which was magnificently drawn out by the influence of Jack's intellectual power—was felt, rather than explained, it being more eloquent than words.

Jack started toward the bunk-house for his cards; but he stopped and turned: "Say, won't poker take too long? Besides, ol' man, with such a stake at hand, I reckon we wouldn't play a very scientific game; we'd be too rattled! What do you say 'bout tossin' up a coin?"

"That would be quicker. Well, here goes," said Ed, flipping a quarter into the air.

"Heads!" called Jack.

Ed caught the little piece of money in his hand and eagerly looked at it. "Tails!" he joyfully cried. "You try yore luck."

Jack produced a quarter and likewise tossed it into the air.

"Tails!" called Ed.

Jack caught the little piece of silver and after quickly glancing at it, cried: "Heads! Now, we're even, we're even! Throw it up ag'in, Ed, an' this time tells the tale!"

Again Ed tossed up the quarter and again he caught it with a beating heart.

"Heads!" he exclaimed. "She's mine! You called 'Tails'!"

Jack gazed stupidly at the coin, then he cried, "My God! you've won! I've lost her—you're the winner!" His dilated eyes still rested on the quarter, but he seemed to be unable to comprehend the message that they had telegraphed to his brain.

He felt a touch on his arm, and he heard a voice murmuring like the falling of distant water: "Jack, I wish I could say something to cheer you, but I kain't, because I don't know what to say." Then as in a dream a hand appeared before him and he grasped it, saying, "Ed, the best man won!" And slowly he walked toward the stable: the sympathetic words coming from Ed's rough, but big heart, caused his emotions to swell and he could not bear to show his weakness.

"Takes it perty hard," Ed soliloquized, looking after Jack. "But it's lucky he suggested the coin instead of a duel." And in great ecstacy he swung into his big saddle and the broncho loped away.

Jack leaned against the adobe wall of the stable for support, his breath coming and going in long, deep sighs! That which we cannot have, we want the more. So it was with him. He had lost his sweetheart by the toss of a coin, and no more as lovers would they meet, because a bargain is a bargain with a plainsman and his word is his bond. He clutched the loosely knotted handkerchief at his throat, and the fire of passion burned hot within his breast! Could he stay chained to the stake and stand the awful torture? No, it was beyond human endurance! He must go; but how could he leave all his ambitions behind. Had he not almost reached the top of the ladder? How could he go down again? Not half an hour ago he felt proud, for then his hopes were high. But now he felt cheerless. A little while ago he was in the highest spirits, but now his spirit was broken. The ranch which had made him swell with pride as its foreman now seemed a thing which has ceased to exist. The future, that had shone so brightly, now was dark. The cool morning breeze that was so fresh and crisp, now felt heavy and depressing!

His dull senses were aroused by the Colonel's voice: "Ain't you feelin' well, Jack?"

"M-mornin', Colonel," Jack responded. "Oh —I reckon I was sort of dreamin'. Say, you wouldn't care to lease the Cimarron Outfit, would you?"

"Well—that's one of the best rentin' ranches in the Maxwell Land Grant."

"Shore. It rents fer a thousand, don't it?"

"An' I'm a-goin' to raise the rent."

"You wouldn't care to consider a lease fer one third of its income?"

"H'm! Depends on who wants it."

"I'd like to lease it."

"You!"

"Shore," said Jack, folding his arms on his chest and crossing his right high-heeled riding boot over the left. There was a short silence in which Jack dropped his eyes from the Colonel's scrutiny.

"Ain't you satisfied here?" the Colonel inquired, as Jack remained silent and continued to gaze at his heavy Mexican spur.

The Colonel could not perfectly understand why a young man with such bright prospects should contemplate a change and he quite naturally expected an explanation, but as Jack had offered none, he had put the question.

"Shore, Colonel, shore," Jack quickly asseverated. "But, you see," he apologized, "I'd like to try ranchin' on my own hook."

"Perty hard to make it go without capital," the big cattle king warned. "Tain't like it used to be; then anybody could rustle a few mavericks* an' git rich."

"Yes, I know, Colonel, but I'd like to try it anyhow."

"Now, see here, Jack," said his employer, laying his hand on his left arm, "I intended to give you a ranch when—well—when you—h'm—when a man saves a woman's life, she ought to be—well—when you merried my daughter!" Jack glanced at the Colonel with a start. "Oh, you two'll git merried; see if you don't! I've suspicioned it right along."

***A maverick is a wild "cow" on the range and the one coming across it had the right to claim it as his own.**

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unbranded calf.

"How?" asked Jack, not knowing what else to say, and feeling that a reply was expected.

"Seen you two so much together," the Colonel winked. "Jack, that May cares fer you I've observed in many little ways; an' I'll bet you children were afraid to ask my consent an' sort of put it off. But I'll tell you frankly, my boy, it's not my ambition that my girl merry fer public or high social relations. My desire is to have her the wife of a man who regards his home as the throne of his love and joy and honor. . . . Since May's be'n back East to college, she's got a fool notion—an' I've not taken kindly to her desire to write for the stage, because it will throw her in company with actors—still, I must confess that my nephew is an excellent feller, though he is an actor—an' I thought if May would settle down to the duties an' the responsibilities of a wife, the theatre might lose its charms."

"She'll be a great writer some day, an' she should merry her equal," Jack mused.

"Men ain't loved because they're great," the Colonel declared.

"She told me that the stage today wasn't the stage of yesterday: actors are becomin' more refined. The ambitious ones who are determined to reach the top are people of the highest ideals."

"Oh-ho!" exclaimed the Colonel. "So, she's be'n educatin' you—eh? Well, I'm not at all surprised. She's given more than one of the boys fever!"

"I've learned a lot of things from her. You know, Colonel, in a country like this, where there's so few good women, us men folks often fergit that we have intellectual powers, an' cultivate only our lower an' baser nature."

"Have you be'n attendin' night school?" the Colonel joked. But, of course, he had not fathomed Jack's meaning, and he wittingly endeavored to sound it, being curious to ascertain the cause of such seriousness. As Jack made no reply, the Colonel asked: "What were you sayin' 'bout cultivatin' our lower nature?"

"Why, I was thinkin' how far above the animal nature of man are the powers of the human brain," answered Jack vaguely.

"Why—yes —I—believe so," the Colonel remarked incomprehensibly. "But I'd like to know whar you was last night!"

Jack seemed not to have heard and as he

gazed into space the Colonel knew that his thoughts were on a subject of which he had given sudden, incoherent flashes, which were puzzling, because the thoughts had poured forth from a strangely affected intellect, and naturally enough, Jack had borrowed them from the very feminine individual who was now the cause of the inspiration. Had not the Colonel's daughter often debated with Jack on the qualities of character? But little did she dream that the force of her words would some day be the means of bringing out the higher elements of Jack's character, which also had influenced those in his rival's, and thereby their physical natures bowed to the mental. These thoughts as they were planted in Jack's brain as by inspiration, first surprised, then captivated it, and took possession.

The Colonel questioned no further and a silence ensued.

"Yes," said he, changing the subject, and resuming a former one, "I'll admit that the stage has some fine people, but I'm very anxious to see May established upon a ranch or in some pretty little home in some civilized city. When I endeavor to point out to her the pitfalls, the snares, and temptations of the life connected with the stage, she pleads earnestly fer the theatre an' its people.

"She says, 'The art is beautiful, an' if it's my aim to reach the top, nothing can embarrass the aim of my ambition. Ah! the art is beautiful—beautiful!' I kain't order her to quit writin', but jus' advise with her an' let her take her own course. In a short time, her cousin, the actor, will arrive, and they will work on a new play. I'm very perplexed. I've often wondered why I allowed her to go back East to College."

The Colonel paused.

As he did so, Jack's old-time jovial nature rallied somewhat, and he smiled slightly, as he spoke: "So, Colonel, you wish me to merry yore daughter jus' to save her from the stage?" At the same time there was a touch of sadness in his whole expression.

"I think the world of you, Jack. I've watched you very closely, an' you're jus' the man I'd like to have my daughter merry. I'm very glad to see you two so much together."

A cloud crossed Jack's face: "Colonel, Ed's the winner!"

"What do you mean?"

"May an' I always supposed that Ed was yore son--till he told us—"

"Then you know he's not my son?"

"He jus' told us afore you came—an'—he's a-goin' to merry her."

Knowing the fierce passions nestling in the breasts of these rough rival plainsmen, who might resort to "gun-play" at the slightest provocation, the Colonel anxiously probed Jack to ascertain his contemplations regarding the prospects of being the disappointed one. "You know Ed's fiery temper?" he asked. "When he sets his mind on a thing he generally gits it."

"He does," was Jack's low response. Then he added, "We done the best we knowed how. But we did come mighty near makin' a bad mess of it, Colonel. Then we come to our senses an' tossed up fer yore daughter's hand—Ed won!"

After a short silence the Colonel exclaimed, "Now, I reckon I savvy why you tried to tell me 'bout man's intellectual powers being far above his lower nature! An' my boy, although I'm very, very sorry fer you, I'm exceedingly glad to hear that you've settled it without blood-shed.

"For yore benefit, an' to save you from passin' through my awful experience, I'll tell you my story. A long time ago I had a rival and he threatened to kill me if I didn't stay away from a certain gal. One day I learned that he was hidin' to ambush me. I crawled up behind him an' shot him jus' as he was about to fire on Andy who had changed clothes with me, so that the feller would think he was me, and I thereby caught him in the very act!"

In his hate toward the Colonel's cowardly rival Jack was ruled by the old severe spirit and custom of the plains, when everyone's lawyer was his Colt's as it were, and he exclaimed, "You done the right thing, Colonel!"

"Ah, so I believed at the time. But later I learned different. I left his body lyin' where it fell, rode to town an' notified the sheriff. Of course, I was told by everyone that I had done the right thing."

"You shore did," Jack affirmed.

"About four years afterwards, to revenge his death, his friends killed my wife an' son, Edward!"

"Colonel!"

"Ah, my boy, let it be a terrible warnin' to you—the darkest hour of my life!"

"Didn't you ever find the murderers?"

"No, although I hounded the whole United States."

"If I had caught one of 'em, I would've tied his quiverin' body to a cactus plant an' made him die of thirst an' starvation!" Jack exclaimed.

The Colonel saw written on Jack's face all his physical hatred aroused to savagery. "Don't my boy, don't fergit that the higher nature of man is best. Yore expression seems to bring back to me all the grief an' the rage I have stifled in my breast!

"Ah, but those days the six-shooter was the law—an' it certainly was a lawless country. But the written law has changed it, as it is now changing the great Southwest. Believe me, Jack—for I speak from bitter experience—shootin' ain't the bes' way to settle love-affairs."

"That's what we thought; so we tossed up—an' I lost!"

"Then it's settled fer good?"

Jack tried to look the Colonel bravely in the face as he replied: "Yes, Colonel, fer good!"

The Colonel warmly grasped the proffered hand and exclaimed, "Thank God, Jack, you're a man! Thar's somethin' in yore eyes which appeals to me!"

Jack turned away.

The Colonel laid his hand on Jack's shoulder, saying, "Soon after the death of my wife an' my son, I saw a little orphant who looked so much like my son that I adopted him, callin' him by the name of my murdered son, Edward. Then I left the place with my new son and May, and came here. Not long after my arrival my father died, leaving all his land to me. That was long ago, an' the people have forgotten all 'bout it. My boy, I am very glad that you an' Ed weren't such fools, an' settled it as you did. Otherwise, I am afraid, my boy, you would have brought on the same trouble.

"Ed has been a good son to me, but he kain't trust his temper. Poor feller, he tries mighty hard to break it, but it will git the best of him sometimes. When I adopted him I didn't anticipate his fallin' in love with my daughter. As he has done so, lovin' her fer all these years, I'm afraid that he kain't stand to see you step between, as he believes, an' consequently it would have to be a bad mess—although you took a gambler's chance, I reckon you've settled the rivalry the best way under the circumstances. I won't try to say any more to you, jus' now, my boy; words kain't express the gratitude I feel in my heart toward you. I'll—I'll jus' step into the stable to see that hoss I bought last night!"

Jack watched the Colonel agitatedly disappear within the stable door. Then he slowly walked toward the pump. It was there that he had won May's hand just last evening; it was there he had beheld her ride around the corner of the mess-house not a little time since, and high were his spirits raised by success and hope and love! But now where was all his elation? Gone! Instead of the proud and overjoyed Jack who had held the tin cup before his lips as he paused to glance over the property under his authority, now he despondently raised the cup to his burning lips, and eagerly drained it to the last drop. It fell from his hand: "To h-ll with water! Whiskey's what I need!" He ran his fingers through the black curls hanging over his forehead and sank slowly on the water trough. "No—no, not that! She taught me to give it up, an' so help me, God, I'll not touch one drop!" With a deep sigh he sank back supporting his head on his clenched hands.

A voice aroused him.

"Jack, dear," said May, laying a hand upon his arm, "has Ed said anything to you about me?'

"May," said Jack, rising and removing his sombrero, "I kain't trust myself to speak jus' now. Ed has something to tell you which will explain matters."

"Why this sudden change, Jack? A short time ago—when you first met me this morning, you were very happy and I felt the same. Now I seem to feel something dreadful will happen."

Jack's eyes would not meet hers, but rested on his sombrero as he mechanically turned it in his hands. Then with a great effort he raised his eyes and met her penetrating look and faltered: "May, I guess our engagement's got to be broken off!"

"Jack!" she cried, "don't you love me?"

"Ed loves you!" he cried almost brutally.

"And you, Jack, don't you?" she implored.

With a convulsive contraction the sombrero was crushed in his hands! "Love you?" he repeated, with wounded feelings, grieved by the doubt as he at first believed. Then the realization came to his disordered brain that she had not doubted him, but was unable to comprehend his strange manner. "Ed won—I lost," he said incoherently.

"Won what? I do not understand."

"You know Ed's temper?"

"Yes?" May replied, questioningly. She could not comprehend Jack's motive for referring at this time to Ed's temper.

But his answer in the form of a question was as complicated as ever:

"S'pose I merried you—what then ? There'd be a fight, an' Ed or I would git killed."

"No, no! Not that!" May shuddered.

"If I merried you, Ed couldn't stan'—"

"Did he tell you that he's not my brother?"

"Yes, an' if I merried you, he'd do something rash an' you'd be miserable! So we talked it over an' settled it the bes' we could—tossed up, an' Ed won."

"You don't mean to tell me that you gambled over me?"

"I know it ain't etiquette to cry over the loss of a game—but who ever heard of a crazy fool tossin' up fer his sweetheart! If a cowpuncher won't bet, I reckon there's somethin' wrong with him—when he gambles away his sweetheart!"

"Do you think I have nothing to say?" May demanded. "Have I no rights? I have accepted you as my fiancé; we have plighted troth, and now, must I take back that promise? Cannot I marry the man I love, when that man loves me?"

Jack believed himself in duty bound to pave the way for Ed. "Ed will make you happy," said he brokenly.

"Not without you, Jack!"

"Remember, May, you're rich an' kin have ever'thing."

"Not without you, Jack!"

Her persistency, tender in its appeal, carried a mighty temptation with it, and Jack weakly pleaded, "Don't talk that a-way, May, you'll make me fergit myself—my promise to Ed! You'll make me go back on my word, fer I love you more than life itself!"

But she heeded not his urgent entreaty. "Ah, Jack, don't you remember how you saved me from the very jaws of death? Don't you remember what good times we have had together?"

"Will I ever fergit 'em!" Then he threw off all restraint and passionately kissed her face, her hands, her hair. "I love you May. Why should we part?" he cried fiercely. "Why should I give you up? You gave yourself to me; you're mine! My gal, how kin I let you go? My gal! My gal!"

An angry exclamation behind startled them. Ed's approach on his broncho had been unobserved by the lovers. "What does this mean!" he demanded sternly. "Have you so soon forgotten our agreement, Jack?"

"Do you think that I kin fergit it so soon?" Jack retorted.

"It's best fer all concerned in this deal that you keep yore hands off of her!" Ed threatened hotly.

"Ed," said Jack, "I want to be square. I'm not lookin' fer trouble, but if it comes my way I won't dodge it!"

Ed's hand dropped on his six-shooter but before it was drawn, May had sprung in front of Jack to shield him with her body. "Don't forget, Ed, that you are a man!" said she sternly.

"I thought I could trust you, Jack, but you've played me false," Ed exclaimed menacingly.

Jack fearlessly stepped out from behind his sweetheart and as he drew himself up to his full height in his high-heeled riding boots, heavily spurred, his chaps, his six-shooter slung at his hip, the faded blue shirt, the big red silk handkerchief knotted loosely at his sun-browned throat, the big sombrero; all his being seemed to protest! "Ed," he quietly replied, "I tossed up with you to save blood-shed an' why should I play you false now? I lost to you an' she's no more mine—our engagement's broken off. I won't be here much longer; I'm a-goin' away. If I stayed here May an' I couldn't be separated by the turn of a coin—it's beyond human nature—an' thar'd be trouble. Fer her sake I'll leave."

He turned and walked slowly toward the bunkhouse.

Ed knew that Jack's word was good, and even his jealousy fell before it; he had to acknowledge to himself that his rival was true as steel—but in his irascible mood he would not openly admit it, and therefore as Jack rode away, he offered no apology.

"Ed," said May sternly, "do you think that I can stand this? Do you think for a minute that I will submit to it? Do you think that the flip of a coin will separate Jack and me?"

"A bargain's a bargain," Ed sullenly replied.

"If Jack breaks off his engagement with me, do you think that I'll marry you?"

"If I kain't have you, neither kin he," barked the dog in the manger, as he dismounted.

"And you have come to this!" she retorted scornfully. "Your love for me is simply a jealous passion. It may smolder on for years then, like a volcano, break forth in a destructive flame, consuming hearts, happiness; destroying faith and even life. I shall have a talk with Jack and if he decides not to break off our engagement, I will marry him in spite of you!" Her dark eyes flashed, she looked superb in her scornful beauty.

"He gave me his word," Ed replied triumphantly, because now, in a calmer mood, he knew that with Jack "a bargain was a bargain" and his word could be relied upon.

"Yes!" cried May, "you have stolen Jack from me, and separated us for all time!" She, too, was fully acquainted with Jack's principles and recognized that he would keep his promise whatever the cost.

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As Jack led his broncho out the stable door he saw someone carrying a lantern, coming toward him.

"That you, Jack?" a voice asked from the darkness.

"Shore, Ed," Jack replied. "Whar've you be'n all day? They be'n lookin' fer you everywhar."

"I don't know whar I have been, except that I was fighting it out all day with myself." He came up to Jack and said: "It's all my fault; I'm an old fool! My jealousy an' temper will be the ruination of me! But I've come to beg yore pardon, Jack; kin you shake the han' of such an ass as me?"

Jack warmly grasped the proffered hand and exclaimed: "By jinks, if it ain't Ed Maxwell ag'in, after all!"

The reconciliation of these rough souls was very touching. It was an intellectual conquest of the lower nature: the brute's instinct was to fight, but the spirit of man's higher nature predominated.

"Jack," said Ed, still retaining the other's hand in his right, and placing his left on it, "I kain't separate you an' May this way—

an' I'm a-goin' away. I've loved her so long—to see her taken away from me, took the man in me with her an' left behind the beast! That's why I drew my gun on you. But I've fought it out all day an' that coin don't cut any figger with yore engagement."

"A bargain's a bargain," Jack stubbornly answered.

"Listen to me, Jack. You and May loved each other an' I've stepped in between you."

"No, you won, an' won fairly!"

"Am I a-goin' to separate two hearts jus' because a little coin happened to turn my way? No!"

"Yes, Ed, but remember our bargain—"

Again Ed's temper became ungovernable and he burst out: "D— that bargain, Jack! If you love the girl, merry her!" Then he added calmly—and it was the magnanimous heart of the Ed of old that spoke—"Jack, you're jus' the man fer her! Take her and be happy."

Hastily, and as though fearing to trust himself further, Ed put his foot in the stirrup of the saddle on Jack's broncho and said, "Well, my frien', I'm off." He swung into the big seat and reined up the impatient horse. "You'll tell 'em not to worry 'bout me, an' say to 'em that I couldn't bear to meet 'em fer the las' time!"

Jack did not know what to say, so stood embarrassed.

Then, after a short pause, Ed continued: "Jack, I've treated you an' May rotten! But I'm awful sorry. You merry her an' forgit me. An' say, tell the Colonel he's be'n like a father to me, an' I'm too ashamed of myself to see him afore I go. May told me what she thought of me an' she's right!"

"Don't blame yourself, Ed," said Jack, because he knew of the tempest raging within his breast and really felt sorry for him.

"Blame myself?" Ed repeated. "I'm too sore at myself to blame myself—I hate myself!"

He struck home the spurs and Jack's broncho responded. "So long, Jack, so long!" Ed called back.

"Ed!" protested Jack.

The darkness soon hid Ed from Jack's view, but he could hear on the evening breeze the measured hoof-beats of his fast-retreating broncho upon the adobe road, as they became fainter and fainter.

"Well," sighed Jack, "he's welcome to my bronc' an' saddle. But I'll be hanged!" He simply could not comprehend Ed's actions!

He remained a long time gazing into the darkness, till he could discern the hoof-beats no longer. Then he turned away, picked up the lantern left behind by Ed, and walked slowly toward the mess-house.

Whose was the triumph of that hour?

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LOSER WINS

Jack sat beside the table in the mess-house, his left elbow was resting on it and his chin was in the palm of his hand. The broadbrimmed white hat was pushed back on his head and his right leg was thrown across his left knee. He was thinking. On the table lay some paper and a pencil. An old oil lamp burned dimly, and slowly the flame crawled up. Then it began to smoke a little.

"Look at your lamp, Jack," said Clara, entering the room.

"Never seen the likes of that blamed lamp!" said he, rising and turning it down. "Now, look at that chimney!" His sister paused; "I believe there was something on your mind," she added.

"I'd sort of like to live in a city an' have an education like you," he answered, after a short silence.

"How strange is life! The ranchers long for the city, and we city folks long for the ranch.

When I first went to 'Frisco I was lost, the city ways were so different from the prairie freedom."

"You seem like another girl to me now; our ways of livin' are separatin' us farther an' farther apart! When we lived in Old Mexico we kids used to play horse together an' make mud-pies. One day I'll never fergit: we was called to Ma's bedside to hear her last words. She took our little hands in hern an' said, 'My children, I'm goin' to the other shore.' We buried our faces in the blankets and cried as if our little hearts would break. The end slowly drew near. She put yore hand in mine and said, 'My son, take care of your sister; protect an' make her happy.' Then lookin' up she prayed fer us, an' died. By an' by they come, took her away an' she was tak'n from us ferever! How lonesome the world became! How dark the days grew! Sometimes in the starry sky at night I thought I'd see her smilin' face! I seemed to hear a voice callin', 'Jack, Jack,' an' I'd look around expectin' to see her by my side. It was only the wind mockin' me! I'd run from the spot to you an' in yore face I saw mother's!"

After a short silence, Clara said, stroking

Jack's curly hair, "But some day we'll see mother again."

"I'm afraid not, Sis. Just think who our father was!"

"Jack, we can't help what we were born, but we can help what we are. Our father has nothing to do with our lives now."

"But I'm so rough!"

"Look at the noble oak: rough on the outside, but beneath its roughness it is strong and can weather the storms. When polished how beautifully the rough oak shines!"

"I shore am a rough one! An' folks seem to pity us so on account of our illustrious father! If they'd only put us in our class!"

"Yes, but our hearts are the same as when we knelt at mother's bedside," said his sister, taking his hand between her own.

"They shore are, Sis! I've tried to be square all my life. Be'n up against some perty hard propositions!"

Betsy burst into the room:

"You're gittin' altogether too familiar with Jack!"

"Well, Betsy," Clara smiled, "I don't know who has a better right."

"I have!" Betsy snapped. "Here you've run off an' left us to take kere of Jack, an' now you come back an' git all the glory!"

"Why, Betsy, I'm not taking any of your 'glory'—as you put it."

"Yes you be! Think I didn't see you holdin' han's through the keyhole!"

Clara smiled.

"It would be a pretty hard matter to hold hands through the keyhole," she declared, after a short pause.

"Huh! think you're awful smart! All I wants you to understand is, that no man kin ask me to make apple pies an' flirt with his sister!"

Betsy swept proudly out. Jack looked at his sister and they smiled.

"Wonder what Betsy will say when she learns 'bout my engagement to May Maxwell?" mused Jack.

"Jack, so you are engaged to the Colonel's daughter!" asked Clara.

"Broke it off an' I'm up a stump!"

"Did you quarrel or did the Colonel object?"

"Gambled with another feller an' he won!"

"Gambled over your sweetheart?"

"May wouldn't stand fer it; the other feller ran away an' now I must become re-engaged. I'm kinder backward 'bout goin' at it. If it was to ride a pitchin' broncho or somethin,' I wouldn't mind it so much; but to ask a girl to merry you after you'd throwed her down—why! I'd rather take my chances on foot in the worst stampede!"

"But, Jack, don't you know there is more pleasure in making up after a little trouble, than having things just go along lovey-dovey?"

"S'pose she refused me?"

"Don't you be afraid. She won't. If girls refused men as often as men fooled girls, there would be very few marriages. When a girl loves a man she will always give in—no matter if he has broken off his engagement on the account of a toss-up," smiled Clara.

"I'd rather be left on the middle of the plains without a bronc' than ask her again! By jinks! it's a ticklish business!"

"Jack, I can very plainly see that the more excuses you make to put off asking her, the more you can't help asking her, and the more you will make up your mind to ask her. Why not grit your teeth, clinch your hands, shut your eyes, and jump right in? Don't hesitate. Your heart is on the turn; don't leave it half ajar but go to her now and throw it wide open!"

"You are shore she won't throw me down?"

"You put your arm around her and see!"

"S'pose she don't love me now? Thar's whar the hitch comes in."

"You can very easily find out by asking."

"If I only knowed what she'd say before I ask her, I'd go right now—but—what if she'd say, 'No'!"

Just then, Daisy, the Colonel's housekeeper, entered with a flourish.

"Miss Morris, I say, Miss Morris," said she, grandly sweeping her skirt, "how do I look? Does my skirt hang right on all sides? Now, what do you think of my hair?" She discovered Jack and exclaimed, in an embarrassed tone: "Oh, excuse me, Jack."

"Women will be women," Jack laughed. "Clothes an' vanity."

"Women aren't vain!" the girls exclaimed in chorus.

"If this ain't vanity, I'd like to know what you call it," said Jack, surveying Daisy's new dress.

"What do you wear those tight boots for? If that isn't style, what is it?" Clara asked.

"We wear our boots small so we kin easily jerk our feet out of the stirrups, when Mr. Bronc' gits ugly an' sun-fishes; we don't want to git caught an' smashed," Jack answered.

"If your big hat isn't style, what do you call it?"

"In the sun it is a shade-tree, an' in the rain it is an umbrella."

"Why do you wear your belt at such a graceful slant?"

"We wear our belts loose so our guns hang at our hips an' we do not feel thar weight."

"That bright red silk kerchief around your neck?"

"Protection 'gainst the hot winds; also to cover up our mouths."

"Those fancy buckskin gloves? Those chaps?"

"Protection against the thorns we ride against when in the saddle."

"If the cowboy isn't vain, I'd like to know what you call it. If he doesn't care for style, please tell me what you—why, Jack, look at your fancy bridles and your fantastic saddles, and you dare to say that women are vain!"

"Clara, I do believe you've become a civilized citizen! Born in the cow-country an' you call this 'style'?" laughed Jack.

"I hope you don't think me proud and vain," said Daisy. "You see, I saw this dress in town and when the ghost* walked, I bought it. When one dresses, one might as well spare no expense to get the best. I say, Miss Morris, do you think two little curls would set my forehead off to better advantage?" Then she invited Clara Morris to go and see the new purchases, and the girls left Jack alone.

Presently a light step sounded outside and Jack's bronzed face flushed with pleased surprise as May Maxwell entered.

"May," he cried impetuously stepping quickly to her side with all the old love-light in his eyes. "I don't have to give you up after all!"

"And you'll never leave me again?" she asked softly as his arms enfolded her.

"Never—if you'll let me stay."

"Let you stay? Ah, Jack, I couldn't let you go."

"As long as Ed was here I'd a-stuck by my bargain—but he's left the ranch—"

Pay day.

always someone to stand up, unafraid, for the right. The courage of Jack Morris to back his ideal served to arouse respect for law and order. Thus, an old cattleman stepped up to Green and said, "I've knowed Jack Morris fer a good spell an' he's all wool." There was a short silence, and then a cheer burst forth from the inner ring of the circle. The old cattleman continued, "If thar's 'nother man in this here part of the United States of Ameriky who's done more fore elevatin' society, I'd like some feller to mention him right now."

"Thet's all right," said Green. "But, didn't these here critters kill some of us this very day? Why not hang 'em up at once an' be done with it? That's whut."

" 'Cause we ain't the cou't, gentlemen," replied the old cattleman. "Let the law deal with 'em. Fer one, I'm plumb ashamed of this thing, an' I heartily endorse Jack Morris's sentiments. If his reputation ain't of any value to us, then he orter, as he's threatened, to give up his services.

"But, on t'other han', if we do value his services, we'll beg him to continue his good work. Apache Kidd is at large, an' whoever has landed him yet, but Jack?"

off our engagement, 'cause I lost a game of cards, May, there was sense in my foolishness. Now it's turned out all right, kin you savvy? I don't think you'll—ever fin' a man who loves you more'n I do!"

"Jack, and you won't find a woman who loves you more than I do."

"You'll merry an' old fool like me?"

"If you'll promise me you'll never play poker over me again."

"I promise; but the nex' feller that interferes with us—"

They heard Hank singing "Sweet Betsy Ann" as he came toward the room from the kitchen.

"He mustn't see us thus," said May, disengaging herself. She hurried to the table, sat down and picked up Jack's pencil. Hank entered, singing his song. Jack motioned him to go to the window at the back of the room.

"Hank," said Jack in a very low tone, when he had joined him, "want to sell that ring?"

"Wall—who wants to buy it?"

"Me. What'll you sell it fer?"

"Paid eighty-five dollars fer it."

"Whew! Cost most as much as a saddle."

"You bet! Wished I didn't have it."

"I'll give you sixty fer it."

"Fork over an' you kin have the durn thing."

Jack paid him, and said: "Hank, I left my bronc' outside the door, will you put him up?"

"Shore," Hank replied, walking toward the door.

Jack came to May from behind, leaned over her shoulder and said: "Here's somethin' fer you, sweetheart."

"A ring!" she exclaimed, "Oh, how lovely! For me?"

"Shore; if you'll wear it."

"I'll wear it, as I wear you, next my heart!"

The lovers spent a blissful hour planning for the future. After a short silence Jack said, "Yore father said he wanted me to merry you."

"Then he doesn't object?"

"No. An' he wants me to merry you to save you from the stage. He thinks it'll throw you in bad company."

"I cannot make father understand."

"No, he can't savvy. He doesn't seem to care to have you write plays."

"Well," May sighed, "I suppose I shall have to give up writing. But, Jack, it is very hard.

ground, tranquility reigned, except for the low mutterings of the wounded, and the mournful moans of the coyotes, scenting fresh spilled blood!

Jack Morris and Harry Western, exhausted as they were, valiantly attended the wounded, doing all in their power to relieve the suffering of both man and beast. Even after daybreak they remained faithfully at their post. Finally, the old cattleman insisted that they "turn in" and leave it to some of the slightly refreshed men. Thus, while Jack and Harry slept, preparations methodically continued.

Upon awakening Jack stiffly arose and gazed around the adobe—it was occupied now by the wounded who were carried in for shelter from the sun's burning rays. Several men moved about, attending them. But the five prisoners were not there. Jack involuntarily rubbed his eyes and silently stared. What did it all mean? Were they taken out and lynched? The thought of the possibility caused the blood to grow hot within his veins and he reviled himself for being so weak as to allow such trickery. Therefore without making inquiry, he pushed irritably past the attendants and went out. Men moved about with quiet dignity; a few groups squatted peaceably on the hot sand, playing cards as sociably as if in the grandest drawing room; others were stripping their dead horses of their saddles and accoutrements, while overhead lazily sailed hideous buzzards. Jack leaned against the door-jamb in deep study. He was aroused by the voice of Green: "Wall," the speaker continued as Jack silently contemplated him; "yore friends was taken to town."

"The bandits?" Jack asked, with increasing interest.

"Shore. The ol' cattleman took 'em to the sher'ff. He's also gone fer hosses fer us an' vehicles fer the wounded. If he'll unly git a rustle on him mebbe thar won't be a full house at the trial."

"Of course," affirmed Jack, "we'll be thar to see that they git the fulles' extent of the law."

"Wall, I reckon!" exclaimed Green. "Moses an' all the prophets won't hol' a candle to us—not by a dern sight."

As Jack and Harry were preparing their meager breakfast, the latter smiled and said, "Reckon the Colonel's daughter will pat you on the back."

winder pane I'd bring 'ol' Johnson' to bear on't."

At this juncture Betsy entered the room, followed by the Colonel to whom Hank hastily explained the situation.

"Sh!" Hank exclaimed, "did you hear a noise?" Hank's revolver was pointing at Betsy.

"Hank!" she said, "put your 'gun' down."

"I thought you be a robber!"

"Me a robber! Have a kere, Hank. I'll not have anyone even think I'm a robber."

"Sh!" said Hank, looking toward the window, "did you hear a noise?"

"You'll hear a noise if you don't beg my pardon."

"Fer what?"

"Fer thinkin' I'm a thief."

"I don't never beg fer nothin'; always earnt my bread."

"You beg my pardon."

"I'm awfully sorry you warn't a robber."

"Hank! have a kere."

"I wanted to try 'ol' Johnson' on you. By gum! you're a thief, anyhow."

"Never stol' nothin' in my natural life."

"You stole my heart, gosh durn it! You smuggled it!"

"I never gave you any encouragement."

"Jus' like a thief! He don't never give anybudy encouragement, but always steals on the sly. When caught he's got to pay fer it—Betsy, won't you be my ol' woman? I loves you more'n anythin' a-goin'!"

"Prove it."

"Betsy!" he exclaimed, about to throw his arms around her.

"No," she said, stepping back, "I wants better proof than that. Jacob served seven years fer Rachel an' they seemed but days 'is love was so great fer her.

"If that rule held good today, there'd be less divorces."

"Betsy, beware of false doctrines an' pretenses, fer they be snares which'll ensnare you."

"You leave me alone fer seven years an' if I ain't merried then, I'll be your wife."

"Seven years—seven years—seven years—seventy-seven years—seven hundred seventy-seven years—aw, Betsy! yore cheeks are like a blushin' peach, oh! fer jes' one big, juicy bite!"

"Hank, you're incorruptible!" she exclaimed.

"Gosh! whar be that gol durn dictionary? Sh! I shore heard a noise." He crept to the whars till night, an' while we demoralized his famous clan, unmolested, he vamosed the deserted town."

After a short silence, Harry said, "Thar's one thing I've be'n a-tryin' to figger out: What has become of Mrs. Brosseau?"

"I've be'n thinkin' of that, too. Say! do you reckon they're in the cave?" With sudden inspiration Jack walked quickly into the adobe, approached a bunk, pulled off the blankets and carefully examined the bottom. Discovering nothing material he likewise searched the next, and the next. Then he bent closer with an exultant exclamation. "Look, Kid!" he added. Pulling up a loose board forming part of the bunk bottom, he peered through. Excitedly he pulled out three more loose boards, and there, in the floor, was disclosed a trap door!

The attendants gathered around. "Git a few fellers to help," Jack ordered. "Thar's liable to be rats below!" He cautiously raised the covering. "Hey you, down thar!" he called. "Come up!" There was no response. "In three minutes we'll burn you out!" Still no answer. As Jack gave instructions for "the smoker", a muffled voice below was heard

"Hello, down thar!" Again the voice sounded. "It's a female—reckon it's Mrs. Brosseau! Hello, Mrs. Brosseau! Anybody else down thar with you?"

"No, Monsieur Sheriff," Mrs. Brosseau replied.

Before anyone could interfere Harry Western sprang recklessly down the ladder. "Kid! Kid!" called Jack. "Come back, Kid, it might be a trick!" However, Harry landed safely. Quickly the others scrambled after him. Mrs. Brosseau was helped to the room above.

"Mos' of the gang's paraphernalia's here," said Harry, surveying the underground room. "Gee, they shore had a good stock of grub! An' them bags look like gold mines to me!"

"Thar's enough yaller boys to pay back the Colonel's loss, I reckon!" Jack jubilantly exclaimed. And they continued the search.

At once the news spread around camp, inducing great excitement, and the entrance was jammed with curious plainsmen.

"Hey, Jack," called one, "the Colonel an' his darter is here an' wants to see you. They're a-comin' down."

Jack met them at the bottom of the rough ladder.

"I'm a-goin' out an' you kin choose atween shootin' me an' gittin' lynched fer it, or you kin—"

There sounded the tramp of many feet outside and fierce cries of—"Lynch him! Lynch him!"

Hank ran to the window and poked his head out.

"Thar' must be no lynchin' down here!" declared the Colonel.

He threw open the door. Jack dragged in the renegade, followed by Harry and Ed Maxwell, who quickly closed the door and barred it.

There was a loud yell: "Lynch Cap'n Kidd! Lynch Cap'n Kidd!"

"Hey, you fellers min' yore own business!" Hank called out the window.

"We want Apache Kidd!" they shouted. "Lynch the Kidd!"

"You kain't have him!" Hank returned.

"Kain't we?" Green, the leader, replied hotly. "We're a-goin' to lynch him an' you'd better give him up."

There was a rush against the door.

"Take him into the kitchen," said the Colonel. "I'll meet 'em!"

All left the room but Ed Maxwell and the Colonel. Ed opened the door and the men came crowding into the room.

"What do you want?" Ed Maxwell demanded.

"We want the Kidd!" said Green. "We're a-goin' to swing him!"

"You are not!" contradicted the Colonel. "I'm goin' to give him up to the sheriff."

"Look yere, Colonel," said Green, "we don't want to make no trouble; all we want is the Kidd! an' we're a-goin' to have him! We're the law on this range fer murderers!"

"He ain't here," answered the Colonel.

"We'll fin' him!"

The Colonel drew a pocket revolver. "Green," he said, "come back."

"A-look here, Colonel!" Green hotly replied, "no man kin pull on me an' live! If you're a-lookin' fer trouble you kin fin' it right here!"

"I've had enough 'gun-work' in my days," said the Colonel, "an' I don't want no more. Boys, kain't you give the Kidd fair play?'

"That feller's got to hang," Green said.

"Yes," the Colonel said, "if he's a murderer, he's got to swing! But let the law take care of him."

"Well, I'll be gosh durned!" Hank exclaimed, with uprising jealousy. How differently she always treated Jack.

"Supper perty near ready, Betsy?" Jack asked. "I'm hungry as a flea!"

"That's why I was scoldin' Hank," she replied. "It takes him all night to git a bucket of water."

"Git us some good supper, Betsy," said Jack, " 'cause it's the last square meal we'll have fer a month to come."

About twenty of the boys entered the barnyard, and most of them went directly to the pump. Jack walked toward the stable.

"Say, fellers," said Green, "this yere Jack Morris a-lords it over us, jus' 'cause he saved the Colonel's darter, whilst us poor devils must do all the dirty work! Jack's got a cinch on us an' we've got to do what he says!"

"This ain't the only ranch," said Hank, "an' if youse fellers don't like the boss, thar's no law as fer as I kin see, to make you stay here."

"Listen to the ol' woman talkin'," said Green sarcastically.

"When you come on this ranch," said Hank, "we didn't ask no questions; but don't think 'cause you've worked here a leetle while, you own the hull outfit."

"Soak 'm! Go fer 'm, Hank! Knock the win' out of 'm! Hank, soak 'im!" the crowd yelled, vociferously.

"Aw, soak yore foot!" Hank taunted, and he went into the house.

"Ha! ha! ha!" the boys laughed.

"What's the matter with the ol' woman?" Bill asked.

"He's all right!" they replied.

"Who's all right?"

"The ol' woman!"

Hank poked his head out of the window. "What's the matter with youse fellers? All gone crazy? You think you're a-goin' to make a fool out of me, don't you? The hull push of you are cock-roaches!"

"Say, Hank," jeered Green, "what was yore maiden name in Kansas?"

"It's none of yore darn business!"

"Listen at the ol' woman ravin'," said Green, "like some ol' Greaser."

"By gum, Green," Hank exclaimed, "a greaser is a d—n coward, an' so're you."

Green drew his six-shooter.

He led the way and they followed him out.

"We must git Cap'n Kidd away in a hurry," said Ed Maxwell. "The boys'll go to town, git filled up on whiskey an' come back to lynch him." He walked to the kitchen door and opened it. "They're gone, but we had a hard time keepin' 'em from doin' mischief."

"Gosh, Colonel!" said Hank, entering the dining-room; "I come perty near shootin' 'ol' Johnson' through the keyhole. Thought we wuz goin' to have a nasty fight; them fellers were so dug-gun huffy!"

"Yes, an' they'll come rippin' back pretty soon an' want to hang the Kidd. They'll git heated up with whiskey, an' you might's well talk to a red-hot stove as try to reason with 'em when they've drunk their full gauge," warned the Colonel. "Bring the Kidd here."

The others entered with Cap'n Kidd. The outlaw was shaven and wore only a moustache, and he looked the picture of crafty Hudson, the Colonel had known so many years before!

"My God!" the Colonel exclaimed, stepping back. "A ghost! Who're you?" he demanded.

The outlaw grinned triumphantly, "Apache Kidd, at yore pleasure!" he bowed mockingly.

The others involuntarily caught their breath. There stood the notorious Captain Kidd, that clever actor of the frontier, composed and cool as could be, scornfully contemplating his captors.

"Hudson!" gasped Colonel Pierre Maxwell, "I thought I'd killed you!"

"Not that time, Pierre Maxwell!" sardonically smiled the renegade.

"Then 'twas you who killed my son an' wife?" demanded the Colonel.

"Killin' you would've be'n pore revenge, so I stole yore son an' wife an' let you live a livin' death! I was a-goin' to let you suffer as long as you would, then I was a-goin' to kill you!" declared Hudson, alias Cap'n Kidd.

"You stole my wife an' son. Are they livin'?"

"Yore wife died long ago in Ol' Mexico; but her two children are livin'."

"Two?"

"Shore; you're the father of a boy an' I'm the father of a girl."

"You scoundrel! I'll have you lynched!"

"Excuse me, but let me tell you somethin' afore I die. Pierre Maxwell, I've had my revenge an' 'twas sweet—sweet! You married Annie Bartlett an' you have paid dearly fer it! If you'll promise me to take care of yore

"Be'n out riding?" he smiled.

"I have been exercising my 'inspiration' again, as well as my physical powers."

"Fall in any more quicksand holes? Anybody who gits such an inspiration as to forgit where she's a-goin' needs a guard to ride with her to always be ready to give assistance."

"I'm afraid I couldn't get anyone to accept the job."

"Couldn't you? I'm lookin' fer such a job."

"You? I thought you were 'drive boss'?"

"I am; but I'd rather stay here."

"May I ask why?"

"Oh—grub's better. Hank an' I have made a bargain; 'If I git Betsy to merry me, he gits her; if he gits her to merry 'im, I gits her'."

"My! Think of the opportunity for rivalry. Who will woo the harder? But won't you come over to the house for supper, Jack?" May invited. "Now don't make excuses but come along."

"But, you see—"

"No, I don't. Why don't you say that you don't want to come?"

"Oh, but I do!"

"We'll be late if you don't hurry."

drew back his hand to hit the foul perpetrator in the face, or to clutch the unprotected throat!

"Colonel," interposed Jack, catching the trembling arm. "Don't touch him: his arms are tied."

The Colonel glared back to find out who resisted him. And his eyes softened when he saw. "Edward, my boy, my boy!" he sobbed, embracing Jack. "I knew it—knew it! Thar was something in yore eyes—"

Suddenly the swish of a hide rope cut the air! All eyes involuntarily saw the deadly noose settle over Captain Kidd's head, and they heard the sharp cry of pain as he was jerked from his feet and dragged by the neck through the doorway, where the other end of the rope was slipped over the horn of the saddle on a swift broncho. Under the sting of the quirt and the spurs the broncho leaped forward and Captain Kidd was dragged over the ground at a gallop, wrenching and racking his body till it felt as if consumed with fire! Mounted cowboys spurred after the dangling object, half hidden in the dust! No human being could live long under such circumstances, and Captain Kidd's end was terrible and all too well executed! There would be no sitting of the court for his trial.

CHAPTER XXV

"I GIVE HER BACK TO YOU"

"Wall," thought Hank, looking out the window, "I s'pose I'm in fer it now. Guess I better make tracks for Arizona; I helped to rope Apache Kidd an' mebbe the sheriff will want to know the reason why. Mebbe he couldn't savvy jus' why I done it an' he'd 'pack' me off to jail. Gosh! I'd ruther leave Betsy Ann behin' than spen' a whole night in a plumb misery jail! Oh, wall, when I come back after seven years they'll fergit all 'bout it an' Betsy'll merry me. Seven years is a durn long time to wait fer a gal to merry you; but if it's got to be, it's got to be!"

"Say, Hank," said Red Nose Bill, staggering away, "is it mornin', yet?"

"Mornin'?" repeated Hank. "Wall, Bill, if you don't put that whiskey bottle 'way, the Colonel'll make you think it's mornin'. You'll be mournin', all right. Good thing fer you the ghost don't walk every day. You'd spen' yore las' dollar fer whiskey."

"Say, Hank, ef you was me an' I was you—hic!—what would you be?"

"I'd be a durn fool, an' you'd be a respectable citizen!"

May had written some little verses for Bill and they now came to him and he drawled them out with drunken accent and confusion:

" 'I leaned agains' a lamp-post col', jes' as the east began to break—my hat was gone, my clothes were torn and some other feller had my stake. My nose was red; my sense had fled; I feared the family breakfast call; my eyes felt like ten tons of lead; my legs felt like no legs at all. Here I was stranded at the break of day, my money gone, no clothes to pawn; my home was many miles away. My 'good time' was o'er, the devil to pay! Across the street I spied a post—the only friend one has when all 'is money's gone an' he has drunk the toast of everyone he knows around—across the street I spied the post an' started 'cross to greet my friend; but the earth went 'roun' so fast I staggered, reeled, to fall at last! I struggled up to fall ag'in. They say, 'Pride goes afore a fall.' Who could accuse me bein' proud, when I so humbly bit the dust? At las' I hugged the ol' lamp-post an' smiled to think I got there safe; but to my horror an' dismay, I saw the sheriff comin' straight my way. Grinned pleasant as I could at 'im an' tried to be the bes' of friends. He looked like a rainstorm at night an' I tol' 'im he was all right. I stood on the door-step at morn, a sorry and disgusted wreck, afraid to meet my wife an' babes: their lovin' arms shamed more than blamed. I could not fin' the key-hole an' was 'bout to leave the house, when my wife opened the front door an' said with tear-stained eyes: 'The baby's dead!' "

Just then May and Clara entered the room. "Oh, Billy, Billy," said May reproachfully, "what have you in your hand? Will you never learn to conquer that evil habit?"

"You see, Miss," said Bill shamefacedly, "I'm like the Irishman who was loadin' stumps onto a sled on a steep hill. One of the stumps got 'way, rolled down the hill, but Pat held on! 'Stay with it!' Mike yelled, as Pat and the stump rolled down the hill together, Pat holdin' on the stump fer dear life. Mike scrambled down to see what was left of Pat. But Pat was not entirely licked! 'Begorrah!' says he, 'I was on top half the time!' That's what I am, Miss—on top half the time!"

"But, Billy, you'll be 'on top' all the time, won't you?" May asked.

"I wants to be, Miss, I shorely do!"

The Colonel, Ed, Jack, Harry and Betsy entered the room in a body.

"Hank," said the Colonel, "did you see who dragged Cap'n Kidd out?"

"Gosh! Colonel, I don't think I did. When I git to thinkin' my memory goes see-saw. First it 'members it saw, then it 'members it didn't see. Now, it's sawin' both ways to onct. The harder I think the more I saw. To tell the truth, guess I saw nothin'!"

"Those fellers will have to pay fer this night's work," said the Colonel; "they'll have to answer fer it to the law!"

"The law be durned!" Hank exclaimed. "Poor 'ol' Johnson', perty soon I'll be carryin' you 'roun' in one han' 'an a law-book in t'other!"

"The boys meant all right," said Jack,* "they're bound to put a stop to crime on this range. They got the right feller this time, an'

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* Although the Colonel's real son, Edward Maxwell, was found, he was still called "Jack" by everyone.

I'll bet, if you did find out who done it, the jury would let the boys off."

"Well," said the Colonel, "guess they made no mistake an' we had better let the matter drop."

"Shore, Colonel," said Hank, "that's the best way. You wanted to give that bandit fair play; now do the same with the boys. If the sheriff asks what you done with him, tell him we were a-takin' him to town an' somehow the durn critter got 'way from us."

"We ought to have let the law settle with him," said the Colonel.

"Do you really think that they will go so far as to kill him?" Clara asked.

"Wall," said Hank, "when a feller's be'n drug over the ground with a rope 'roun' 'is neck fer a mile or two, he's generally perty sick; but if he ain't, he shore is a tough buck an' has got a graft on life!"

"It's the range law," said Ed.

"But," said the Colonel, "the range is changin'."

"Yes," Hank sighed, "poor 'ol' Johnson'!" Hank seemed to be greatly moved by the Colonel's remark. He took the weapon from its holster, laid it in the palm of his right hand and looked at it fondly. "Poor 'old Johnson'!"

"Say—Hank," said Jack, "want to buy a ring?"

"H'm—what do I want a ring fer?"

"Oh, I thought you might be able to use one."

"I got to wait seven years fer Betsy."

"Hank!" Betsy snapped, "you needn't go blabberin' it to ever'budy!"

"She thinks 'cause Jacob waited seven years fer his gal, I'm a-goin' to wait that long fer her," Hank explained.

"Betsy," said Jack, taking the ring from May's finger and holding it so the diamond sparkled brilliantly in the light, "if Hank should give you a ring like this, wouldn't you fergit 'bout the seven years?"

"Let me see it," she said, beginning to be tempted. Jack handed the ring to her and she put it on.

"It's a beaut!" Hank said proudly.

"What do you know about rings?" Betsy asked disdainfully.

"Wall, I know a heap more 'bout rings than you think I do! I hain't such a greenie as you think I be. I bought that ring fer you, but you went spoonin' with another feller an' I sol' it to Jack."

"To Jack?" May asked.

"Shore; an' it's a genuine stun; paid mos' a hundred dollars fer it."

"Then, Hank," said Betsy, "you'd better buy it back in a hurry!"

"By gum! you in earnes'?" He thrust the gold into Jack's hand before he could object, and drew Betsy out.

"Well," said the astonished Jack, "if that don't beat the old Harry!"

"Now what am I going to do for a ring?" May asked.

"May," said Jack, " you kin never wear my engagement ring ag'in."

"What do you mean, Jack?" she asked in blank astonishment.

"I mean just this"—Jack said, with deep emotion, "it isn't legal to merry yore sister, is it?"

"Why—you don't mean—Jack, you don't mean that you are my lost brother?" May asked.

"Shore, an' thar's yore sister," Jack replied, pointing to Clara.

"Clara," the Colonel said, putting his arms around her, "yore mother was the best woman I ever knew."

"Jack and I were just talking of our childhood days this evening," said Clara.

"Can you remember anythin'?" inquired the Colonel.

"Very little. We could never see our mother alone, and I remember very little about her. She always looked so feeble and very seldom left her room, except in the company of a man we called our father. No one was allowed to see her when he was not there."

"He was not your fa—her husband, but a scoundrel who stol' my wife an' my children from me!" the Colonel equivocated. In one sense be had spoken the truth, though in fact he had deceived Clara because he desired to keep the unhappy unions a secret.

After a short silence, Clara continued.

"After she died we think the authorities got after him and he ran away, leaving Jack and me to shift for ourselves as best we could."

"That's the 'snake in the grass' the boys have jus' lynched, an' damme me! I'm glad they've done it! He's made me suffer; he's had his revenge—I'm glad they've done it! We used to do it—lynchin' ain't any too bad fer such a scoundrel!"

"Why did he tell you his secret?" Clara asked, after a pause.

"Why? Because he knew thar was no hope fer him an' he wanted to bleed an ol' wound. He wanted me to know how he had fooled me! I thought he was dead, an' he comes afore me like a ghost an' tells me what a failure the ol' law of the range was: the six-shooter, which I took into my own han's, an' instead of lettin' the law settle it, I tried to, myself! The ol' days have passed 'way an' now we shall be law-'bidin' citizens. We're on the turn. From now on I shall prohibit the wearing of a gun on the home ranch."

"Colonel," protested Jack and Ed.

"On the round-up, it's necessary," the Colonel continued, "but on this ranch it mus' be put 'way!"

"I'd rather walk behin' the plow than give up my 'gun'!" said Jack. "Colonel, give me charge of the Cimarron ranch; thar's range—thar's freedom!"

"You've got the spirit of yore father," the Colonel said; "but we're in the iron grip of the law! Now, that the law's a-comin' we've got to obey it."

"If that law crowds us too hard," Ed exclaimed, "then, to the devil with the law!"

"S'pose that every citizen of the United States carried a 'gun' 'an used it to settle little disputes?" the Colonel asked. "I'm glad to see the passing of the six-shooter!"

"Most of the killin's done by fellers who are drunk," said Jack, "an' yet this very same law lets whiskey be sold by the barrel! The law won't let us lynch a 'bad man'; but it allows a 'law-'bidin' citizen', who pays it good taxes, to kill us with drink!"

The Colonel cleared his throat. There was much weight to Jack's argument, and the Colonel was at a loss what to reply.

"This place is gittin' too crowded fer me," said Ed, "the law's pressin' us too close!"

"Wall," said the Colonel, "I s'pose tomorrow they'll fin' that feller hangin' to some pole an' the sheriff'll come rippin' over an' want to know who done it."

"I'm glad the boys saved me the trouble of lynchin' that scoundrel," said Jack. "I'd shorely have killed him!"

"Jack," said the Colonel, "I'm afraid I have a lawless son!"

"You shorely have, Colonel," Jack smiled; "what do you think of a feller fallin' in love with his own sister?"

"I hardly know what to think of him," smiled the Colonel.

"That was a lucky escape! I s'pose this newfangled law would've put me in jail!"

"Just think of it," May sighed, "a twice-broken engagement."

"It was my fault the first time," said Ed.

"Ed," said May, "I ask your pardon for speaking so hotly to you."

"You said only what was right."

"No, I spoke too harshly. But I couldn't give Jack up just because he lost a toss-up."

"Ed was leavin' the ranch," said Jack, "so we could git merried."

"What! what!" said the Colonel.

"It was the only way out of it," said Ed.

"He wanted to give me a square deal," explained Jack.

"Ed," said the Colonel, "you were goin—away an' would not tell me?"

"I couldn't," said Ed. "I wouldn't be here now, if it warn't fer Cap'n Kidd. The boys tol' me an' I returned to see what I could do."

"I'm glad they done it," said Jack. "Ed, we kin be thankful fer one thing: he's brought you back to us—an' to May."

"To May!" Ed exclaimed in a dazed way, as if he could not quite understand.

"Shore," said Jack, "she can't merry her brother, kin she?"

"No," Ed replied slowly.

"Well, if she can't merry me, what's the matter with me merryin'—I mean, let me fix it up a-tween you."

"Fix what up?"

"Why—ain't you a-goin' to merry her?"

"Ask her to merry me?"

"Shore. If you won't ask her, I will."

"I ain't fit fer her."

"Come, Clara," said the Colonel, "let's go over to the house. Harry, I wish you would ride over to town an' tell the sheriff 'bout Cap'n Kidd."

"All right, Colonel," Harry replied.

"Don't be too hard on the boys."

"I won't. You know we all were so excited when you found yore lost son that we didn't see who pulled the Cap'n out."

"Now," said Jack, as the others left the room, "I've got you two corralled; you might buck a little at first when I put the saddle on you—so does the bronc'; but it only shows he's feelin' good. I'm not much at match-makin'—Hank will tell you that! I always pulls the cinches perty tight when I puts on my saddle, so it won't slip, an' I'm a-goin' to do the same with you two." He placed May's hand in Ed's. "Ed, I lost her onct to you by gamblin'; you gave her back to me. Then I lost her by law; an' now I give her back to you. She wouldn't stan' fer our bargain an' you showed yoreself a white man, when you wouldn't come atween us. I'm shore May kin savvy you even better than I do. So, if you'll excuse me, I'll go over an' see how things are gittin' along."

They watched him disappear through the door. Ed turned to her and said, "Kin you forgive me, May?"

"With all my heart!" she smiled, through the tears in her eyes, shining now with happiness.

"May," said Ed, "I'm only a rough plainsman, mebbe I've done wrong; but I love you, May, love you dearer than life! You will very soon tame me. You will be my example, my idol, my adviser, my companion an' wife. Nothing kin part us, but death. When the gray hairs come, an' we're called away, the people will point at the tombstone an' say, 'May Maxwell accomplished her work an' made him an angel.' "

She raised her lips to his, and he kissed her humbly and fondly. Then he tried to say something fitting for the solemn occasion; but not anything sacred enough could he utter. So, with a joyful pronunciation of her name, he drew her closer within his loving embrace.

What a revelation the day had been! What complete changes had a few hours wrought. Events had occurred so swiftly and so utterly astounding that they simply could not be grasped at once.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE COYOTE OF THE DESERT

The next day Jack explained the death of Captain Kidd to the sheriff. "Yes, sir," added he, "Cap'n Kidd fooled us fer years 'bout as slick as a kyute fools a dog in a race—grinnin' at us all the while!" After a short silence he continued: "The deserts of Arizona ain't lifeless. Thar's several varieties of cacti. One of 'em is a branchin' kind, an' its thorns will pierce very strong leather. It's a cruel plant!

"One afternoon my bronc' was dodgin' amongst the cacti, when I noticed some buzzards hoverin' an' circlin' near the ground. I reined over thar, an' suddenly jerked up my bronc's head! He snorted an' stared! Hangin' on a cruel cholla cactus plant was a human body—dead!

"I dismounted an' read a slip of paper that was pinned upon its breast, with these words: 'This fool tried to trail me. When I caught him he was alive. If he is alive when you find him he is welcome to live with the compliments of Cap'n Kidd.'

"It was a nasty job to free the body from the thorns, an' I grew thirsty. I punctured a saguaro cactus with a couple of shots from my six-shooter, an' thar came a flow of water sufficient to quench my thirst. That was my first experience with that human devil! Just to think I believed him to be my own father!

"It was my ambition to give the Cap'n up to justice, but I was fooled. The worst of it is, instead of payin' attention to business, I fell in love, an' a feller in love ain't no account fer anything else! I would have given anything to have caught that kyute myself! It ain't so much the reward that I keered fer, but it's the glory.

"The Colonel, my father, went to Kansas when he was a young feller, an' thar he fell in love with a girl by the name of Annie Bartlett. They became engaged. A feller by the name of Crafty Hudson was in love with the girl, too, an' he hid an' tried to kill the Colonel. But the Colonel fooled him!

"He left Hudson lyin' supposedly dead an' went to town to see the sheriff. When they came back to the body, it was gone. 'Some of his friends had be'n attracted by the shots an' kerried him off,' says the sheriff. Anyway, they got no trace of Hudson, alias Cap'n Kidd, alias Apache Kidd.

"The Colonel merried, an' the nex' year I was born. Three years later my mother an' I was stolen away from home. The Colonel thought we was killed by Hudson's pals for revenge; but he couldn't locate 'em. The fact is, Hudson wasn't killed by the Colonel, only wounded, an' it was he who kidnapped us to Old Mexico. I couldn't ever see my mother alone. When she died, he was thar all the time. Afterwards he ran away.

"I made up my mind to hunt him down. I had an idea that he had turned rustler, an' it was trailin' him that I got on the trail of Cap'n Kidd, an' afterwards found out that him an' my supposed father was one person. I sort of took pride in it, an' my one ambition was to be the one to catch the cleverest of outlaws—the kyute of the desert. One doesn't always realize his ambitions.

"I won't tell you of Kidd's crimes an' foxy tricks, but simply how he was finally captured. Oh, how much I envied Harry Western when he got him!"

Jack smoked a while in silence.

"Yes sir," he went on, "Harry Western is to be congratulated! You see, Apache Kidd kinder felt his time was gittin' short.

"In 1866, the Colonel adopted a son, an' returned with him and May to this ranch. Then there came years of cattle-thievin', an' we all were kept busy on the trail. Perty soon we heard of Cap'n Kidd, an', like me, Harry got ambitious to ketch him. But Cap'n Kidd wasn't over-anxious to git caught, an' so he's led all of us a merry chase.

"When I learned that Cap'n Kidd was my dad, I made up my mind to git him! But I nearly fell through the floor when he confessed that he was not, an' told that I was the Colonel's real lost son.

"I s'pose you'd like to know how they caught so cunnin' a fox, who had fooled everyone fer years? Well, I onct heard of a feller who said, when another feller said that Cap'n Kidd could'nt be caught, 'Everythin' an' everybody's got a weak spot somewhars.'

"Yes, sir, everybody makes mistakes. Cap'n Kidd made a fatal one in simply choosin' jus' one man of his gang, an' that man cooked his goose! If Brosseau hadn't be'n so loco to rile the Colonel in the bank, Cap'n Kidd's hidin' place would still be secret. But Brosseau lost his head an' gave me a chance to work.

"So, the Cap'n, seein' his time was drawin' short, planned to visit my father in private. Las' evenin' it happened that Red Nose Bill was bringin' home the new cook wagon from town. The Cap'n saw a good opportunity to hide in it, figgerin', I reckon, to lay concealed till after dark, then sneak up to the house.

"But Harry Western happened to go over to examine the new wagon, an' he scared the Cap'n out. Harry seen the Cap'n slip to the ground an' crawl away an' he got him!

"In the excitement, when the Cap'n told us that I was the Colonel's real lost son, somebody roped him through the door an' dragged him out!"

"Served him right!" exclaimed the sheriff.

"Guess it's 'human nature,' as May says. But I would have given anything to've be'n in Harry's boots when he caught Cap'n Kidd!" Jack remarked presently.

"Why do you reckon he identified you after all you did to him?" asked the sheriff.

"I don't know," Jack replied. "I shorely believe he had a soft spot fer Clara an' her mother, an' he knew the Colonel would take to me, an' I would see to Clara, I reckon. But mind, we're not to tell Clara that he was her real father."

Again they smoked in silence.

"Say," said the sheriff, "I reckon you all was so surprised when you found out you was the Colonel's real lost son, you didn't see who roped Apache Kidd?"

"It was done so quick—in the excitement we didn't see," Jack answered, bending over so that the sheriff could not see his face, and he knocked the ashes from his pipe on his left boot-heel.

"Well, the Cap'n's cashed in an' I reckon it'll be hard to find out his executioners," remarked the sheriff.

"I'm afraid so, sheriff. You'll have yore troubles to find anyone to appear in his defense."

"You bet! An' the Cap'n was shore a Bad Man from 'Way Back!"

"Say, Jack," he added, after a pause, "are you shore that Red Nose Bill didn't know that the Cap'n wasn't a-hidin' in that cook wagon?"

"It's hard to prove," Jack confessed. "But Harry made us sit up an' take notice, didn't he!"

"He shore did!" exclaimed the sheriff. "But, what else could you expect? Wasn't it nacheral fer the Kid to git the Kidd?" And the speaker's grin broadened.

"Well," smiled Jack insinuatingly, "be kereful that the Kid don't spell his name now with a double 'd'!"

"He shore would be a tough customer!" declared the sheriff. "An' him so innocent lookin'!" But, I'll bet he won't cook in this here ranch any more."

"He'll be my private secretary from now on. An' when you kain't trail yore man, sheriff, call on Harry Western! We'll be his under-study! He'll show us a few tricks in pheelosophy!"

And both men grinned understandingly.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE COWPUNCHER'S WEDDING

"Thar ain't nothin' that kin scare me much," said Hank. "But I guess a feller's wedding is out of the ordinary line," he added after a short pause.

"You see, me an' Betsy had been workin' perty hard gittin' things ready, an' the unusual strain, I s'pose, made us a leetle unsteady the las' day.

"Anyhow, I begin to git impatient, an' mebbe a trifle unneighborly toward Betsy. She resented in the mildest way possible fer a spirited woman, an' I had to blame somebody to resuscitate my unstrung nerves!

"I kinder felt ticklish all over. I never had no experience, standin' up afore the hull population an' sayin' things after the preacher. Say, what right has he askin', anyway? Betsy warned me to answer him to my best ability.

"'If he gits too personal—!' says I, droppin' my right han' on my law-book.

" 'Don't you dare wear yer 'guns' at my weddin',' says Betsy, emphatically, tossin' her head.

" 'What!' says I. 'D'you think I'm a-goin' to git merried without my side apparel? No sir! I tell you what, Betsy, it takes plenty nerve to git merried anyway'.

" 'Nerve!' she says, scornfully. 'You haven't any.'

" 'Is that so?' I retaliated. 'Don't you fool yourself! How about yore nerve'?

" 'Well, Mr. Hank, if I didn't have any more nerve than you've got, I'd hide my head in a gopher-hole!'

"Then I got sarcastic: 'Say,' I says, narrowing my eyes to mere slits, 'you ain't got no more nerve than an old tooth!'

" 'Think yer smart!' she snapped, an' turned on her heel.

" 'Now, Betsy, ol' gal,' says I, 'we don't want to fight afore the weddin'. What 'll it be afterwards, if we scrap now?'

" 'Oh,' she sighs, 'I'm tired out. I wish the weddin' was over.'

" 'So do I,' says I. 'Say,' says I, after a thought, 'what's the use of waitin' till this evenin' anyway? Why not git merried right now?'

" 'You're gittin' anxious,' says she.

" 'Anxious nothin'! Only, I don't see the use of puttin' it off, that's all.'

" 'Now who's got the nerve, Mr. Hank?' she taunts. 'You kain't wait; you 're gittin' shakey.'

" 'Shakey!' says I, disgusted. 'Shakey nothin'! Jus' feel my pulse!'

" 'No sir!' says I, after scratchin' an idee out of my head, 'I weren't never scairt of a preacher, an' why should I be of this here one?'

" 'You'd better think of fixin' up yore togs fer the weddin', than be arguin' 'bout bein' scairt, Mr. Hank.'

" 'When you see me standin' up afore the hull Western America, Miss Betsy, in my full dress, b'iled shirt, an' patent leathers, you'll be the proudes' gal on the plains! You'll swell up like a toad!'

" 'Huh!' says she disgustedly.

" 'Is that so?' says I. 'Wall, I dunno. But you see, ol' gal, it's this way:

" 'Sweet Betsy Ann, sweet Betsy Ann,
Sweet Betsy Ann from Kansas.
An' when you drop yer big dark eyes
My heart jumps high with joy an' cries—
Sweet Betsy Ann, sweet Betsy Ann,
Sweet Betsy Ann, I love you!'

" 'I s'pose you contemplate that being perty,' she sneers.

" 'It beats a jackass, don't it?' says I.

" 'Oh, you hunk o' iron!' says I, grabbin' her in my arms an' bestowin' the usual allowances upon her rosy cheeks. 'You kain't tease me. I know you!'

" 'You think you do,' she smiled.

" 'We're a-goin' to be happy. Jack promised to make me a foreman, an' we'll have a shack all by ourselves!'

" 'An' you promised me a bran' new—'

" 'Bet yer life!' says I. 'I'll buy you a bran' new steel range cook stove with ten holes an' three ovens!'

" 'An' a dresser with a big plate glass mirror, dear?'

" 'Two or three, by gosh!' says I. 'An' a pianer!'

" 'An' lace curtains?' says she, givin' me the sweetes' kiss I ever tasted.

" 'Bet yer sweet heart!' says I. 'I'll git a big leather rockin' chair, too."

" 'An' a big rug fer the company's room?'

" 'Uh-huh,' says I. 'Anythin' you ask.'

" 'Oh, you 're so good!' says she, expressin' it in the customary manner, nacheral fer all women.

" 'Not at all,' says I, pressing her still closter. 'I wants to make you happy. Are you?'

" 'I never knew what happiness was before!'

" 'Nor I!'

"We were awakened from our dream by the entrance of Jack.

" 'Oh, don't min' me,' says he. 'Jus' go ahead.'

" 'I'm mentally refreshed,' says I, 'so let's git to work. Betsy has got to see to her boodwar, an' I've got to 'gentle' my b'iled shirt! Say, Jack, if yore presence is to be seen at my weddin', you've got to wear a 'full dress', an' don't you fergit it!'

" 'An' gentlemen collars, boys,' says Betsy.

"Jack put his han's to his neck as if a noose was placed thar fer a lynchin'.

" 'An' boys,' says Betsy, 'remember, no 'guns' at the weddin'!'

" 'Wall,' says I, 'if that 's the case, when the stiff-backed, goggle-eyed preacher gits to rakin' into my private history, I'll bust his durned face in!' Well I guess we'd better be gittin' ready fer the matinee. I need time to git fitted to my b'iled shirt.'

" 'Do I have to wear a 'hard' collar, too?' Jack sighed.

" 'Bet yer life!' says I. 'An' b'iled cuffs, too! I've got to wear a stiff hat.'

" 'You an' Jack had better be practisin' puttin' on yer 'hard' collars,' says Betsy.

" We followed the idee—that is, we tried to. After a few hard tries, Jack managed to git into his collar an' he grins at me. I was sweatin' like a chicken with its head off! That collar was enough to try the patience of Job!

" I couldn't stan' the dug-gun thing on my neck any longer, an' I give it a jerk, ripped it to blazes, an' I said things which I'm ashamed to repeat at the present moment!

"Anyway, I tol' Betsy I wasn't goin' to wear a bracelet 'roun' my throat. She says if I didn't wear a collar an' look like a groom should, she'd not merry me.

"Well, I finally done it, an' you ought to've seen Betsy smile.

" 'You look like a regular man,' says she, giving me a taste of her pleasure full on my mouth.

" 'You look jus' lovely!' says I, returning the affection in like expression.

" 'You'll have all the gals jealous,' says Betsy, eying me with a suspicious glance.

" 'How 'bout the men?' says I, lookin' at her with unblushin' idosity. 'We'll be the talk of the day!'

"She says:

'Patience is a virtue;
Possess it if you can.
'Tis seldom seen in a woman
But often seen in a man.'

"You see, we was to be merried in the eatin' room, as it was the larges' available space under cover, an' we knowed that we had to accommodate a large percentage of the boys.

"In the middle of our discussion we heard the approach of the first of the audience, an' I says, 'They're comin'! Let's negotiate in this other department.'

We waited a week, it seemed to me.

" 'Isn't it about time the preacher showed up?' says Betsy, alarmed.

" 'I fergot all about the cuss,' says I. 'S'pose—jus' s'pose he didn't show up?' Betsy looked about to wilt. Then I got exasperated at the preacher! Says I confidential like, 'If he disappoints us, he won't ever officiate at our weddin' or anybody else's!'

" 'Hank, you ought to be ashamed of threatenin' a preacher's life,' says Betsy.

"We was interrupted, an' therefore I could not argue the point.

"Perty quick the house filled up. In the meantime, the preacher was givin' us our rehearsal.

"Bimeby, after what seemed ages to me, we marched up the trail between the chairs an' benches to the tune of an organ.

"I felt like a feller runnin' the gauntlet with Injuns standin' on the sides with thar war clubs, —only we didn't run; we walked! I perty near felt like stampedin'!

"Betsy held up her head like a princess—no wonder, she was hid behin' a veil, whilst I had to put on a bold face an' think when to put down my feet to the slow organ tune.

"Wall, the parade finally arrived at its destination, an' the preacher made me an' Betsy stand side by side, facin' the crowd.

"He turned his back on 'em, an' stood afore us with a leetle book in his hand. He asked me more questions than an ordinary woman. I kain't jus' remember 'em, but I recollect sayin' 'Yes' an' 'No'. I kinder got rattled!

"When I took aim an' tried to put the ring on Betsy's finger, I missed the mark by a mile. Then my face turned red like a lobster. The sweat begin irrigatin' my face as I endeavored to force the instrument of wedlock over her thumb!

" 'See what you're doin', she whispered frantically.

" 'You put it on,' says I, under my breath. 'I've lost my reason!'

"I heard somebudy snicker in the audience. That made me stubborn, an' I made up my mind that I would put that ring on the right finger if I had to keep 'em thar the hull night! An' I done it!

"Then it was all over an' Betsy was my wife!

"The preacher grabbed her an' kissed her full on the cheek! Mebbe I didn't git hot!

" 'Say,' says I, softly, 'you do that ag'in, you prayin' hypocrite!'

" 'I won't let anyone call me that!' says the preacher, shakin' with wrath all over his outward surface.

" 'How're you a-goin' to help yoreself?' says I. 'What're you a-goin' to do about it?'

"Before they could stop us, me an' the preacher went to it in fierce shape. We was rollin' on the floor, bitin', scratchin', pullin' hair, and damagin' each other in general.

"They finally divorced us an' tried to explain.

"'Now, you're a perty sight, Mr. Groom,' says Betsy. 'I'm ashamed of you.'

"'What right did you have a-kissin' that buck-toothed preacher!' says I, growin' more indignant as the catalogue of injuries swelled afore my black eyes. 'What right!' says I, 'an' you a merried woman!'

"Then someone explained that the preacher had a most perfect right to kiss the bride, an' I had to apologize on the spot.

"The preacher graciously accepted. We shook han's an' perty soon 'all went merry as a merriage bell.'

"Thar's one thing I want to say in conclusion. It's the only thing fer a man to do—git merried as soon as he possibly kin. I don't believe in long engagements. If you are shore that you kin git along together without contention, git merried at once, an' don't put off today what you kin do tomorrow!

"I'm merried now an' I'm durn glad of it. I hope you'll have harmony like me an' Betsy have."

May Maxwell and Ed smiled assuredly. They were to be married the following week and, of course, thanked Hank for his kindly advice.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BORN AGAIN

"Kid," said Jack, "Clara is bound to take an outing, an' I've got some important matters to attend to, so I reckon it's up to you to play coachman." And his smile spread insinuatingly.

As Clara and Harry were leaving, Jack also fired another similar shot. "Don't git too preoccupied, Kid, the Injuns ain't all back on the reservation!"

Harry Western, waving a reply, urged forward the team and Jack's raillery was lost in the rattle of the light spring camping-wagon.

"Jack always was a big tease," ventured Clara presently, breaking the silence between them. "But I let it go in one ear and out the other."

After a short pause, Harry said, "He shore has be'n a good friend to me!"

"Yes, Jack has taken a great liking to you. Hank says he's glad that he's merried, because you've cut him out—meaning, I suppose, that you've come between him and Jack."

"Oh," smiled Harry, "Hank needn't fear. Jack's heart is big enough to hold us both, an' another besides."

"Do you mean that he has a sweetheart?" questioned Clara.

"If he has," sighed Harry, "it's more than I know."

They fell silent, each in deep contemplation. Thus, the little team of bronchos jogged over the dusty adobe trail: the two persons behind them silent and talkative by turns.

At high noon, with the pitiless sun beating down on the blinding adobe, which radiated the heat up into their faces, they were gladdened by the sight of an old mesquite tree. While Harry unhitched the horses and fed them sparingly some barley and hay from the tail-gate of the wagon, Clara Maxwell made preparations for the frugal meal. Harry shortly kindled a small fire with old bark and dead branches lying around and put on the kettle to warm over some lamb stew. Clara Maxwell also put the coffee in some water they had carried especially for the purpose and put it on the fire. "Isn't this just like camping!" she exclaimed delightedly.

Presently they sought the scanty shade and began to satisfy their ravenous appetites. "How differently food tastes here," Clara remarked. "I suppose you simply couldn't endure city life."

"Not very long. I shore would git plumb lonesome!"

"Which is the more lonesome, a stranger in a crowded city or a tenderfoot on an endless plain? Though most persons prefer the crowded city, I've spent much time in both places, and it seems to me that here one's heart has more chance of growing big!"

"You think so?" questioned Harry. "Seems to me that I feel smaller every day. What is life, anyway! Ain't we born to die! Don't we lay wearily down at night to git up the nex' day an' sweat ag'in? So on the nex' day an' the nex'—till we die? Ain't it much like the weather: a few days of sunshine an' all the rest stormy? What was yesterday to me? Didn't I toil jus' the same? True, today now thar's sunshine? But what'll tomorrow be? What does it all amount to? Take the Colonel, fer instance, barrin' all his trouble an' takin' all his success in account, what does it mean? He kain't take his money with him when he dies—an' life ain't very long. Then, what is life?"

"Don't you think that this life is only a school to fit us for better things?" smiled Clara Maxwell encouragingly. "On Judgment Day the chaff will be thrown aside for the fire, while the wheat will be gathered into the garner."

"But, if the wheat's already spoiled, how kin it be saved? I don't think God would listen to a no-account kid like me!"

"Ah!" Clara exclaimed softly, "listen to this: 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that *whosoever* believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.' And again: 'Repent and be baptized every one in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. . . Though they be as scarlet they shall be white as snow through the blood of Christ.' "

Harry slowly arose, then sinking to his knees he asked: "What shall I do to be saved? What shall I do?"

Softly he heard Clara Maxwell's voice, and it seemed like an angel whispering: " 'The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.' We must 'be born again.' "

" 'Born again'?" Harry repeated incredulously. " 'Born again'? How?"

"Of the Spirit the second time. 'And we know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not.' Did not Paul say, 'I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh, the law of sin. There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. To be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.' "

"Oh, how I would love to be like you!" declared Harry vehemently. "You're so good!"

" 'There is none good but God . . In my flesh dwelleth no good thing.' "

Harry opened his eyes wide with astonishment! "Well," said he, "then what kin we do?" Every declaration seeemed more puzzling.

"First, we must *repent*; second, we must *confess our sins* to God; third, we must have *faith in Jesus Christ* as our personal Saviour."

"I wish I could savvy!' "

" 'The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness to him: neither can he know them because they are spiritually discerned . . . This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer.' "

Harry knelt on one knee before Clara and supplicated, "Will you learn me how?"

With a smothered exclamation Clara Maxwell stared over the bent head. Harry glanced up, saw her gazing thus, and he looked around. Slowly he arose. A few yards away stood a mounted Indian, making a critical examination of the camp. Straightway the native encircled them, continuing his scrutiny. The campers endeavored to appear composed. Shortly three more Indians rode up, each armed like the first with old Spencer repeaters. In low gutteral tones they discussed the situation in a manner that was convincing. Clara was so frightened that she could not eat, but Harry, with assumed indifference, began to stir the kettle. To the campers' increasing apprehension more Indians arrived, till they were completely surrounded. They had no weapons of any description, and if they had, they would have been just as helpless.

There was no assistance within many miles; on every hand a broad expanse of range, walled in with mighty mountains. Visions of their bones, gnawed clean by hungry coyotes, instinctively filled their minds. Harry had to do something to relieve the nervous tension, and he mechanically dished up some stew, rejoined the young lady and audaciously continued his meal, in a manner that implied that he did not care for all the Indians in the territory! But, as they increased in number, he did not dare to demonstrate so with eye to eye contempt. He merely endeavored to converse with Miss Maxwell as if they were alone, simply ignoring them. It must have perplexed them—at least, it apparently kept them at bay.

How long they remained thus, they could not recollect. And even to this day they argue as to the number of Indians. She swears that there were about two hundred, and Harry contends from three to four dozen. Howbeit they both agree that there were enough to make the blood run cold! They were shockingly startled by a loud yell, instantly answered in a wild chorus, causing their hair to stand on end. Simultaneously the entire band of Indians wheeled their little ponies and began to encircle the campers, tossing their arms and weapons in the air and yelling hilariously. Clara and Harry looked into each other's eyes and mutely said, "Our last day has come!"

The circle spread out and gradually drew away. Like the lion and the mouse the campers felt they were being played with; no chance of escape. Thus as they defiantly glared back at the deadly circle, they saw a puff of smoke, followed by the sharp report of a rifle! With a wild yell part of the circle broke, and dashed toward them, firing and shouting as it came. Clara involuntarily clutched Harry's arm. Swiftly and relentlessly approached the reckless riders, followed closely by more of their band! What chance had the two? It was hard to die without striking a blow! Yet, weaponless they must stand, watching the oncoming braves! But, when within ten yards, suddenly the horsemen swerved and dashed recklessly by!

"Look! look!" cried Harry, pointing just ahead of them. "It's a cotton-tail! They're a-chasin' a cotton-tail!"

With a sigh of relief Clara and Harry watched them chase the poor rabbit, which was soon driven within the fatal circle, and the end quickly came. One of the Indians threw himself from his pony and with a long, triumphant yell, held up the quivering trophy.

When the sounds of the chase had died away, Clara, said, "I've had enough camping today. Let us go back."

"Do you think God protected us?" Harry asked reverently.

" 'God is our refuge and strength'," quoted Clara, " 'a very present help in trouble . . . He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.' "

"Oh, I'd like to know Him!" Harry said. "It's all so wonderful!"

They gathered up their trappings, hitched up the bronchos and drove homeward.

Upon arriving there they told of their adventure. "You shore had a close shave!" Jack declared. "Generally the Injuns take everythin' away from you, settin' you adrift afoot. An' even murder you sometimes, throwin' your bodies in the brush. But that's all right, Kid, I savvy; I've be'n in love myself! You ain't responsible for lettin' them devils creep up on you, when there was a nice girl by yore side!"

This so completely agitated Clara and Harry that their tormentor's convictions were substantiated. In private Clara confidentially told her brother that he must have considered himself a great matchmaker.

A few days later Jack came unexpectedly upon Harry in the stable, reading a book with thin, gilt-edged leaves, and covered with soft black leather. Harry blushed a little, then proudly stood his ground. "A Bible, Kid?" asked Jack.

"Clara loaned it to me."

"It shore's a good book!" Jack declared.

"Seems to me, Jack, it's mighty grand! So interestin'! An' it shore makes a feller think—some!"

"It shore does, Kid—Mrs. Smith used to tell me stories of it, an' Bill Upton used to rip out a sermon or two onct in awhile. Lately, though, we've all be'n so busy we ain't had much time fer readin'—"

Hank interrupted them with a perplexed frown. "Say!" he exclaimed, "I'm in a deuce of a predicament! The preacher, he come to Betsy Ann an' got her all worked up over buyin' a pianer an' takin'—"

"A pianer!" echoed Jack and Harry.

"Shore. An' Betsy begged me so gol durn hard that I up an' consented. Says I, 'If we've got to mortgage the hull sheebang' —"

"Who'll give her lessons?" asked Jack.

"Why, the preacher."

"The preacher!"

"Shore pop—after school. So, after thinkin' over the proposition, says I to myself, 'It ain't jus' right to mortgage our weddin' presents, an' I sauntered here to borrie 'bout two hundred bucks from you an' the balance I pays on monthly installments till the pianer's mine. The preacher's an agent fer a firm in Los Angeles, an' he said he'd offer me very liberal inducements."

Jack winked at Harry, turned again to Hank and asked, "What else does that preacher do fer a livin'?"

"Oh, he sells books, paints houses, teaches school, pianer lessons an' I hear he's a-thinkin' of runnin' fer sheriff. One thing shore, he inflicts some perty high idees on the women folks. What in Sam Hill does Betsy Ann want a pianer fer! But she was so set on it, I jus' couldn't bear to refuse her."

"Even barbarians have music, Hank. Why shouldn't you? You cert'nly have a wife to be proud of! Why, you kain't show me a more progressive woman in New Mexico!"

"Say, Jack," Hank warned, "don't let her hear you talk that-a-way. I'll have to buy her a swell carriage an' high-steppin' hosses. Betsy got some perty high notions. It's all right to have 'em as long as they don't cost too much—fer when they do, they're unpropitious, or somethin'."

"Well," said Jack after a pause, "I wish you'd ride over to town an' fetch back Calico, Kid."

As Harry rode past "The First Chance" saloon he heard a voice addressing him. Turning, he saw Green lounging with some idlers in front, and continued on his way, not noticing them. In vain Green yelled abuses. Hence, desiring to avoid the rowdies upon returning, Harry rode in the rear of the saloon. But it so happened that Green saw him and stopped him. "Zay, why didn't you stop when I tol' you!" he demanded angrily. The Kid ordered him to step aside and allow him to pass. Green did not move. Wherefore, he was almost ridden down. Jumping aside, he let the horse go, but quick as a cat he climbed on the back of the horse that led behind.

The Kid reined up his broncho with a sharp pull. "Git off Calico," he commanded coolly.

But with a galling curse, Green cut the tether with his knife. Instantly the Kid was alongside. "You'll hear from Jack Morris for this!"

he burst out. "Jack won't stand no liberties from even a pore jackass as you!"

"Why don't you git me off!" challenged Green, with a sardonic sneer, and he cut the tether.

The Kid jumped from his broncho, stepped forward and caught the end of the tether hanging from "Calico's" neck. Green's friends jeered him and he attempted to plant his fist in the Kid's face, but finding his efforts useless he dismounted and made a vicious jab which landed on the left side of the Kid's head as he ducked. Then, the Kid did a very queer thing. Instead of hitting back or drawing his six-shooter, he stood straight up and offered his unprotected cheek, saying calmly, "Now, hit the other side, too!"

With unconcealed amazement Green hesitated, utterly dumbfounded! Had he heard aright? "'Now, hit the other side, too'!" The blood curled hotly in his veins, and forgetting his sprained hand which had come into compact with the Kid's head, he swung hard on the defenseless jaw! The Kid fell like a log. Holding his aching hand, the big coward stood, snarling over the senseless form. Hotter boiled the blood within him, and he drew back his boot to deliver a kick; but before it could be delivered he was drawn back. "Let the Kid be," said Red Nose Bill. "He didn't do you no harm, anyway."

"Didn't he start this here fight?" Green blustered.

"Well, haven't you licked him? What do you want to hit a man when he's down fer? He's only a kid anyway."

" 'Now, hit the other side, too'!" Green contemptuously repeated. "Zay, what's he a-tryin' to give us, anyway! An' him pokin' his jaw right in the way of my fist!" he complained.

"You'd better put some col' water on yore fist," suggested Red Nose Bill. "It's a-swellin' up like a mashed potater. You go in an' git patched up, whilst we doctor up the Kid—he mus' shore be some hurt!"

Early the next morning Hank aroused Jack with the information that he had found "Calico" waiting at the stable door, the tether being cut off short at the neck, but no one had either seen or heard of the Kid. Jack walked quickly to the stable and made a careful examination of "Calico," also the tether. Soon Jack and Hank were in the saddle loping toward Maxwell

City. Arriving there, Jack inquired if the Kid had come in yesterday. He was told that the Kid was at Madam Myrile's and so rode thither. Dismounting in front of the popular house, Jack and Hank tied their bronchos, entered, greeted the modest little Madam and asked about the Kid. Gravely she invited them to be seated and sat beside them. Then she gave them an account of the fight.

" 'Now, hit the other side, too'!" Jack repeated bewildered. "What do you think of that, Hank! Say, what's got into the Kid, anyway!"

"He born again," said the Madam.

Jack and Hank looked at each other, then at the Madam, and then around the room.

"I reckon you've got me up too early, Hank!" said Jack. "I mustn't be awake yet. 'Born ag'in', Madam? What do you mean?"

"The first time we're born of flesh; the second time of the Spireet—" she explained. "So when the monstur Green heet Harry, the Spireet no strike back, but say to heet the other side too—like our Saviour."

"An' did that—that Green have the nerve to hit the Kid that-a-way!" Jack exclaimed. "Wait till we git our han's on him, Hank!"

"No goot," declared the Madam. "He's already leeked 'to frazzle', he say."

"Who did it?"

"The Keed."

"The Kid!"

"Sure."

"How?"

"Easy 'nough."

Again Jack and Hank looked puzzled; the situation was too deep for them.

"Say, Hank," said Jack, presently, "please pinch me an' let me know if I'm awake. Madam whar is the Kid?"

"In No. 4."

"Kin we see him?"

"Sure," replied the Madam, and led the way.

Upon the threshold Jack stopped with a surprised exclamation. Hank peered over his shoulder to ascertain the cause: there sat the Kid in an old rocker, and nearby paced Green.

"Come in, Jack," invited the Kid.

Jack looked first at the Kid's swelled jaw and head, and then at Green's bandaged right hand.

"Say," confessed he, "I don't see the joke! Will someone please be good enough to explain this here entertainment?"

"Oh, it's all right," smiled the Kid.

"Fellers," said Green, "the Kid's licked me to a frazzle! I shore take off my hat to him! You knows how I always hated him—fer no reason—an' always tried to git him to fight so'st I could beat him up proper. Well, yesterday I got my chance. I hit him on the top of the head, sprainin' this here paw, but instead of fightin' me the Kid stuck out his jaw an' says, 'Now, hit this side, too!' Well, it shore so completely bambozzled me that I couldn't think. Then I got so mad I swung with all my might on his protrudin' jaw! It near put him out of business.

"I've always knowed that the Kid warn't no coward, an' after coolin' off a bit I tried to figger out what was his game. But I couldn't. All night I figgered. In the mornin' I was more perplexed than ever! Says I to myself, 'He mus' have a card up his sleeve shore.' At las' I got so curious that I couldn't set still any longer. Why should he tell me to hit the other side, too? It shore wasn't natural. I never heard of such a thing afore. So, lettin' curiosity plumb git the bes' of me, I came here to fin' out. An' when the Kid jus' set thar a-smilin' at me, with no malice, at all, I was more stumped than ever.

Says I to myself, 'Here's a new game. I don't know the rules.' The Kid has the hull town a-guessin' an' me in particular. Tell 'em, Kid, what you tol' me a leetle bit ago."

The Kid smiled, as he quoted: "'If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. . . . Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine: I will repay, saith the Lord. . . . Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head . . . Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.'"

The others silently gazed at the mysterious speaker. They simply could not comprehend the case.

Green broke the silence. "Now, you savvy how the Kid licked me to a frazzle?" he asked. "From now on, I'm his obedient servant—I shore am! I'll do anythin' fer him I kin!"

After a pause, Jack inquired, "How's yore head feel, Kid?"

"Much better; it don't ache near as bad. I'll be ready to go with you in an hour or so."

Jack turned to the Madam and said, "Hank an' I started off without breakfast an' I reckon you'd better pack in a hundred dollars' worth of pancakes!"

As the Madam was about to go out, Green started to follow her.

"Ain't you a-goin' to join us, Green?" the Kid invited.

"Me!" exclaimed the astonished plainsman. "After what I done! An' you want me to eat with you?"

"If Jack won't object."

"Anythin' you want, Kid," said Jack, more confounded than ever.

"Well!" gasped Green, "this shore beats the Dutch! It shore does!"

"You ain't any more stumped than me," confessed Hank. "I always felt that you warn't fit fer our company, an' some day one of us would git yore scalp, but the Kid has shore done the trick. An' how he done it, by jinks, it shore beats me!"

When the trays of tempting food arrived, before the others began to eat, the Kid slowly arose, raised his right hand and asked God's blessing. More amazed than ever the others silently looked on.

Presently they ate, the Kid, endeavoring to ease the awkwardness of the situation. Green, however, gulped down his food, agitatedly arose, bade them "so long" and hastily stumbled out.

"Kid," said Jack, "You've shore 'licked him to a frazzle'. I've always felt that it would be my job, but you've done the trick—"

"An' Green could make four like the Kid," said Hank. "Well Kid, you must've plastered them coals of fire on perty thick! An' if a kid kin lick a man that-a-way without a six-shooter, why—it shore knocks out the shootin' irons!"

The Kid did not reply, but over his face beamed a smile of deep contentment and joy.

"Yes," remarked Jack, "when you're 'born ag'in' six-shooters are no account!"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE HUMOR OF JACK

"Jack, you'd better take a rest—go up into the hills fer a spell," advised the Colonel. " 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.' Take a vacation."

Jack thought it over and decided to take his father's advice.

"Hank an' Ed are too much taken up with their brides to think of goin' campin' with us, so I guess we'll have to go alone," said Jack to the Kid.

Thus they packed a heavy camp-wagon and hitched six mules to it. Harry tied two saddle horses behind and they were ready to start at day-break.

"Now, stay a long time," Hank grinned, holding fast to Betsy's arm. "We kin run the outfit without you. Me an' Betsy will be up one of these days to see you, with some home-made apple pies, 'jus' like mother used to make.' "

"Be shore that you do," said Jack as he waved a last farewell.

At noon the mules crawled into the little cowtown of Cimarron. The midday sun beat down on the dusty adobe road; and yet, the children of this land do not mind it—except that it is very hard on the eyes.

Jack and Harry unhitched the mules at a boarding-stable, called "The Broncho Corral," and threw them some hay. Then the campers walked to a little eating house for dinner. Two hours later the outfit crawled out of town toward "the hills."

The journey was without incident, and they arrived at the camping ground in due time.

Jack had traveled over his father's land—miles and miles of it—and now he pitched a tent on the bank of a stream in his father's foot-hills. In a remarkably short time the camp was made and the supper was hurried as fast as possible: the fragrance of the pure mountain air gave to the campers a very keen appetite.

After the meal was eaten and the dishes washed, Jack rolled a cigarette and sat at the campfire. He endeavored to read a book by its flickering light. One of the hounds put his big paw on Jack's shoulder and tried to lick his master's face. Jack jumped up by way of defending himself and with gentle caresses scolded the playful thoroughbred by calling it pet names.

"He likes you," Harry remarked. Just then "Calico" neighed as he jealously watched Jack pet the hound. "So do they all," Harry continued smiling.

The baying of a hound was heard echoing through the hills, and the one at Jack's side sprang to the chase, with long, loud yelps, which in turn rang through the hills, and echoed and re-echoed!

All the sportsman's blood in Jack and Harry thrilled and they longed for the morrow, to be on the trail. Among these foothills and their canyons are cinnamon bear and mountain lions, the cool, clear streams are filled with trout; and above, in the beautiful parks on the mesas are grouse, wild turkeys and white-tail deer.

At eight o'clock Harry said, "Guess I'll turn in."

"Reckon I'll sleep here," said Jack, and rolling himself in his heavy blanket, he pillowed his head on his saddle, and was soon fast asleep under the stars.

About three o'clock the campers were awakened by the baying of the hounds, who had struck a fresh trail. Again, the hills echoed and re-echoed to the sound.

At daybreak the camp was astir. Harry went to the stream to catch some trout, while Jack made the coffee.

The morning was clear and cool. Not a leaf waved, and the smoke from the campfire rose straight toward the sky. Harry presently returned with ten trout and they were put in the frying-pan. The campers rubbed their hands with delight and their mouths watered as they watched the delicate brown fish sizzling in the butter. How good the coffee smelled.

"This is the way I like toast," said Jack, "smothered in butter." He spread a large lump and it melted on the thoroughly warmed bread. "Say, ain't them fish perty near ready?" he asked.

"Almost," Harry replied. "Say, Jack, but you're gittin' impatient."

Jack smiled. "Somethin's given me an awful appetite this mornin'."

"Here's a fish that's done."

They ate heartily. When their ravenous appetites were satisfied, they washed the dishes in the stream and placed them away in the camp-wagon.

"We ought to git thar by sun-down," said Jack. He cracked the long, snake-like whip and the mules crawled up the trail.

"Whar's that book you were readin' last evenin'?" Harry asked.

Jack reached back for it and handed it to Harry, saying, "Do you like love stories?"

"You bet I do!" Harry replied. "Is this one good?"

"It ain't jus' one story, but it's a book of many. You see the name's on the cover, 'Little Stories of American Life.' "

Harry turned the pages carelessly. He stopped at one of the stories entitled "The Spider and the Fly."

"That sounds like a funny love story," said he. "Guess I'll read it if you will excuse me, Jack."

"Shore. Say, kain't you read it out loud?"

"Never learned how. But I'll tell it to you when I've read it. It ain't very long."

"Harry," said Jack, "if you read love stories, it goes to prove that you're in love."

"With whom, Jack?"

"Search me. Mebbe it's the Madam."

"How about yoreself?" smiled the Kid.

"Say, Kid, you'd better read that story."

Harry laughed. "Who is she?" he asked.

Jack pointed to the hills and said, "She's thar?" And he began to roll a cigarette.

They looked at each other and smiled.

Then Harry read the story to himself. When he had finished Jack asked, "Well?"

Harry told him the following:

"Viola Goodman was the only child of well-to-do parents, who lived at Riverside, California. She had wavy, auburn hair, an' soft blue eyes, very expressive. She was a beautiful gal, an' bes' of all, she had an especially fine disposition, an' character.

"Not only these favored her, but she was endowed with many talents. All this had won her many friends, an' a beautiful disposition had captivated 'em. Chiefly, a young man by the name of Raleigh Forsyth, who asked her to be his wife. She accepted and they were engaged.

"The gal was studyin' music an' she boarded at Mrs. Logan's high class house, bein' a great favorite everywhere, especially among the young folks and students who also boarded at the same place.

"She was jovial an' always did her part toward havin' a pleasant time after study hours. But she was true to her lover, even though she did take pleasure with other young men in small plays, which they gave to pass the long winter nights an' entertain their friends."

"Wished I could find such a gal," Jack sighed.

"Now, who's in love?" Harry laughed.

"Yes, but this is only a story."

"That's so," said Harry. "But you've interrupted me.

"The winter nights passed rapidly. She was the star an' Daniel Wentworth was leadin' man. He fell madly in love with her. But he knew that she was to be merried soon.

"One day he took the landlady in his confidence, an' they together schemed a plan. 'The spider spun a cunnin' little web to trap the innocent little fly'. For their next entertainment he planned a mock marriage. The entire scheme had been kept a secret. An ordained minister was visitin' Mrs. Logan an' he performed the weddin', as he thought as a true one.

"Everything worked out fine even to the serving of the feast. The guests departed. Then Wentworth tol' the gal she was his legal wife!

"She became frantic. She tried to leave but was forced to stay an' live with him as his wife. She sent word to her father an' to her lover. He was heart-broken.

"Her father was not entirely reconciled to her engagement with Raleigh Forsyth, because he was not wealthy, an' when he received the news he wrote his daughter to remain with her husband as long as she was legally married to him. Besides, he came from a rich family.

"She followed her father's advice but her heart was heavy. She never forgot Raleigh. She was sad an' cheerless—a pitiful wreck. But her wounded affections were blessed in after years by three beautiful children.

"It ain't good fer you to smoke so much, Jack," advised Harry.

Jack looked at him. "Say, Kid," he smiled, "you're a regular 'sky-pilot'!" After a pause he added, "I'll bet that you had a good mother."

Harry looked away. "Yes," he answered, very low.

"But, mebbe a dad that was too strict?" Jack suggested.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Kid, that you're too good fer these parts."

"Jack, you flatter me. I'm not any better than you—an' not half as good."

Once more Jack smiled. "I like you," he said after a pause.

Harry looked pleased. But, just then a tardy mule called his attention and he cracked the big ten-foot lash.

"Oh my!" sighed Jack after a few moments' silence, "Guess I'm doomed to bach it. Say, Kid," he said, finally, "I kain't jus' git over it: comin' so near marryin' my sister. It kinder made me feel skeery!"

"Is that the reason you're not goin' to git spliced?" smiled Harry.

"Guess so. An' then ag'in, they say 'when a man merries, his trouble begins.' "

"I don't believe it," declared Harry.

"Don't you?"

"That is—when thar's a true merriage. It's the greatest joy on earth."

"Why Kid," Jack smiled, "you must've had experience."

"Not very much. But I've read 'bout it in books."

"Do they really tell the truth?"

"I think so. Don't you remember? Yore

sister said that she always tried to put forth a lesson in her plays."

"That's right," said Jack. "I wouldn't read a book that wouldn't learn—teach me something. It's a waste of valuable time."

"Do you think love stories are?"

"Some of them," Jack smiled. Then he added, gravely: "But some love stories are a great help. My sister showed me—when we were engaged—that love is everything! An' now my life seems empty without it!"

They remained silent for a long time.

Jack revealed the channel of his thoughts: "Ed is another feller since he's merried. He's always smilin'; Hank acts the same way. They must have drawn the right cards."

"You have held good hands yoreself, Jack," Harry smiled. "If you did lose the game that time, you won in the end. It was a case of the loser winning—that is, you won Ed's respect an' admiration."

"That's better than winnin' at cards," Jack said. And again he lapsed into silence.

Occasionally he talked on various subjects, but at most he said little. Harry knew that Jack was thinking, and he too kept silent.

When the sun was straight overhead in the heavens they stopped to cook the noon meal and feed the hungry mules.

Jack produced a small whiskey flask. Harry put out his hand for it, saying, "Give that to me; you don't need it, Jack."

"Only a few drops to quench the thirst," smiled Jack.

"A few drops are a few too many. You see, Jack, I'm a strict 'sky-pilot,' ain't I."

"You've got a strange influence over me, Kid; I reckon you've got me hypnotized!"

"I hope so when you want to take this," said Harry, indicating the flask. "This is many a poor fool's downfall."

After dinner Jack and Harry took a little nap. Jack awoke first and he saw a happy smile on his companion's face. *Then in the solitude of the foothills Jack did a very unexpected thing: he knelt and kissed the sleeping youth!*

Harry opened his eyes and stared around as he sat up.

"I thought that durn fly would awake you afore I could skeer him off!" Jack stammered, rising and wiping his face with the handkerchief at his neck.

"Is it time to be goin'?" Harry asked.

"I reckon it is. The flies are gittin' bothersome here, but up thar, whar we'll camp tonight, they ain't so bad."

"Isn't it grand to be free from all responsibility?" Harry asked.

"Bet yore life! I feel as gay as a young kitten! What do you say to a wrestle?"

"You're too strong fer me," Harry laughed. "But, say, I'll beat you shootin'!"

"That's a go," said Jack, whipping out his six-shooter. "Whar's a mark?"

"Here's one!" Harry smiled, indicating himself.

"Git out, Kid!" Jack exclaimed, slapping him on the back.

"Well, I am, Jack, when I try to beat you with a Colt's."

"Don't be so shore. Now, you see that fly on Calico's left ear! Watch me knock—"

The hounds came baying over a hill, and Harry touched Jack's arm.

"Look up thar," he said.

"By jinks!" Jack exclaimed, "a bear! Saddle yore bronc', Kid, an' we'll have some fun!"

In a surprisingly short time they charged up the hill in hot pursuit of the bear which disappeared behind a large rock. When they rounded it they saw it scrambling up the rocks with the hounds at its heels. The sportsmen spurred after them, hot on the trail! They dared not risk a shot for fear of hitting the thoroughbreds.

Slowly the bear and the hounds gained on the horses. The riders had to take good care or they would easily have been unseated on such a rough surface. Finally the horses were distanced.

"We might's well go back," said Jack. "Old Bruno knows his ground."

"Bear meat ain't so very good jus' now, anyway!" Harry grinned.

"That's right. We'll git another chance, though," said Jack.

They turned their bronchos toward camp, picking the way with Western intuition.

When they had retraced their steps about half a mile, Jack exclaimed, "By jinks! what's that?"

Harry's eyes followed the direction of Jack's finger and he saw just ahead the body of a man hanging from the branch of a tree!

"The victim of a lynchin' party!" Harry exclaimed.

They dismounted for examination. The body hung out of reach. Jack climbed the tree and cut the weather-worn rope. The body feel and hit the ground with a dull rattle! The decayed clothes fell off.

"I reckon it's be'n up thar fer quite a spell," said Jack.

"See, Jack, he's been shot, too; thar's the bullet holes," said Harry, pointing at several holes in the well-preserved and parchment-like skin.

After a close examination, Jack said, "They're worm holes!"

He pushed away the rotten clothing with a stick and searched for papers, but found none.

"Let's bury him under those rocks," said Harry.

When the bones were laid away, Jack and Harry left the place, Jack remained silent until he reached the camp.

"Let's pack up," said he, without explanation.

They broke camp, and as they were leaving the spot, Jack glanced back over their trail and asked, "Kin you guess who it was, Kid?"

Harry looked at his friend a moment and said simply, "Cap'n Kidd, I reckon."

"Up thar—yonder lays the Cap'n!"

"An' after all the trouble he's given you, Jack, you have laid him away in his last resting place!"

"Because, Kid, you have shown me that to do good fer evil is best."

CHAPTER XXX

THE MAN IN CHAPS

Jack was smoking and looking at the blaze in the fireplace in the mess-house of his father's home ranch as he stood leaning with a hand upon the shelf. After a while he turned to Harry Western: "Kid, I'm kinder dissatisfied!"

"You? You've got everythin' a feller could wish fer," said Harry.

"I used to work hard fer my fifty a month an' I knowed the value of it. Now I've come home an' have ever'thin' fer the askin'. When I worked on the round-up fer my grub an' clothes I felt contented as I went 'long, toilin' each day, an' feelin' good at night, 'cause I had earned another day's pay. But now ever'thin's planned out fer me—I can't stand prosperity. Hank said I ought to git merried. Red Nose Bill suggested to go on a spree. What would you say?"

"Me? Oh— I'd say be contented with what you have, an'—git merried."

"Um— guess that's better than goin' on a spree, anyway." He smoked a while in silence. "Say, Kid, you 've made an impression with the gals here, wonder you don't git merried."

"Me, Jack? Why I couldn't any more ask a gal to merry me than you could love a rustler. I shore couldn't. Too bashful!"

"Kid, bashfulness often robs one of a great many pleasures."

"Kain't help it."

" 'Tain't so blamed hard after all."

"You goin' to try ag'in?"

"It depends. When I starts a thing I always completes it. I started out to git a wife, an' ef she's livin', I'll round her up somewhars! Guess you're right, Kid, I orter git merried. But, 'whar's the material' as May would say."

"The what?"

"The material—the thing I am to merry?"

" 'The thing'! Wait till I tell yore sisters!"

"Oh, I see yore game. You're tryin' to git on the good side of 'em. Of one, at least!"

"Now, Jack, you know my heart's so taken up with you, thar's no room left fer women."

"Um—h'm! I thought so!"

"You did? How?"

"Why— 'cause you 're always watchin' me. I've seen you lots o' times."

Jack smoked awhile, thinking. "Wish I could sew as good as you kin," he remarked. "I sewed this rip t'other day," pointing at a tear in the sleeve of his heavy flannel shirt, "an' the durn thread pulled through. Guess I didn't put a big 'nough head on it."

"I'll git a needle an' sew it fer you," said Harry, obligingly. "Jack, that's the time I caught you."

"I've always got my eyes on you," Jack smiled.

"Wonder you don't stare me out of existence."

"I'm makin' a close study of human nature. That's what my sister does before writin' a play."

"You a-goin' to write a play, too?"

"Wasn't thinkin' of it, jus' yet. You better git that needle an' thread an' durn this tear." Harry opened the door, put one foot over the sill, and turned again to Jack. He seemed to be looking at the floor and smoking. Then he looked up and saw Harry watching him. Both smiled. And Harry went out. Jack continued to smoke. "A crafty kid," he muttered at length, "but not as crafty as this 'student of human nature'. Wonder what May would say to that?"

Harry re-entered and went to the table. "You better come over here near the light," he said.

"Ever have much trouble to thread a needle?" Jack asked, sitting on the table.

"Not very much. Do you?"

"I shore do! The thread goes ev'rywhar but whar I want it to go. Let me see you thread the needle."

"But it's already threaded."

"Kain't you pull the thread out an' show me how to put it in ag'in?"

Harry did as Jack had asked. "Um!—that's jus' the way my sisters thread a needle. But you haven't a knot on the end of yore string."

"I use this kind of a knot," said Harry, taking a button-hole stitch.

"Whar'd you learn it?"

"A gal showed me."

Harry sewed in silence and Jack watched every motion.

"There," said Harry, breaking the thread after he was through. "Ain't that fine?"

"Kid, a woman couldn't have done better!"

"I used to make extra money sewin' fer the boys."

"How much do I owe you?"

"Twenty dollars a stitch!"

"Whew! Guess you'll have to wait." Jack walked to the fireplace and threw in his cigarette. He saw Harry stick the needle in his shirt and remarked, "Say, Kid, a woman sticks a needle in her dress, doesn't she?"

"Guess she does."

"Does a man?"

"Hardly ever, that I know of."

"He puts it down whar he kain't fin' it when he wants it ag'in. A woman knows whar to fin' her needle when she wants it. She puts it whar you jus' put yore needle!"

"How do you know?"

"Watched my sister." Jack came toward Harry. "You 've got perty han's, Kid. But you ought to raise a moustache!"

"Tried it onct, an' got discouraged," grinned Harry.

"I thought the Colonel didn't allow anyone to wear a 'gun' on the home ranch," Harry said, changing the subject abruptly.

"At supper this even' I got him to change his min'. Tol' 'im how the boys're carryin' pistols concealed in thar shirts. 'Better let 'em wear thar guns in thar belts, so 'st you kin see they're armed an' be ready', says I. He thought it was a good idea, and said he'd thought of 't too. When my 'gun's' here," he placed his hand upon the holster which hung low down on his right hip, "I feel like I'm master o' the situation. Afore, I felt like a soldier without his sword." Jack mused a few seconds. "Want to play a game o' cards?" he invited abruptly.

"I never learned how very well," Harry answered confusedly; he did not like Jack's perceptible manner; it was too deliberate.

"Let me learn you," Jack insisted.

"Promised my mother never to play, drink or smoke."

"Bet you eight bits you're a good ways from home."

"I ain't got no home," said Harry, walking sadly away.

Jack looked after him. "I haven't had one very long," he said, after a short pause. "Hardly know how to take it: everythin's so easy. Guess I'll saunter over to the house. You comin'?"

"No; I believe I'll go to bed."

Harry did not go to the bunk-house but began walking the floor. Plainly there was something heavy on his mind. He leaned against the table—his head dropped.

Jack looked through the open window at the back of the room, his arms resting upon the sill, watching Harry. Soon Western raised his head with a deep sigh, then walked toward the kitchen door.

"Homesick?" questioned Jack. Harry stopped with a startled exclamation.

"Kid, you're sad tonight," said Jack sympathetically. "Mebbe you're in love."

"Marriage is like ridin' a pitchin' broncho," Harry broke out suddenly. "Its front legs often nearly touch the ground, then up into the air you go, only to come back to earth an' feel that pile-driver blow. The brute will grunt an' squeal with fear an' rage. Again an' again the terrible stiff-legged jumps! Then with amazin' quickness it will throw itself upon its back, hopin' to crush you. Sometimes it will roll. One of its favorite tricks is to brush along a fence, forcin' you to stan' on the opposite stirrup, an' then the cunning little brute will pitch an' tear at you with its teeth. Marriage is a treacherous creature! We must have uncommon gifts as broncho busters, or we'll be ruined for life."

"H'm—my experience has be'n different. I've had a wide experience, too!"

"You have?" Harry asked with a slight smile.

"You bet!" said Jack, entering the room by the window. "Some busters know how to break a hoss, an' some don't know. All bronchos kain't be handled alike. No more kin one woman be treated like another."

"Do you know, I'm sometimes jealous of you?" asked Harry, after a pause.

"Of me?" Jack said, amazed.

"Yes; 'cause you might merry an'—an'— I think a lot of you!"

Jack was silent. Then he put his hand on Harry's arm: "Kid, at times I notice somethin' in yore life; you become gloomy an' yore face tells me of some sorrow which you try to conceal. When we take a man on this ranch we don't know what he was; we ask no questions an' are told no lies; but we very soon know if he's onto his job! He's got to be straight goods to stay here. I've be'n keepin' my eye on you an' you're all wool. My father 's given me full charge of his 'Little Empire', an' I need an assistant. Ed is goin' on a honey-moon trip with my sister, an' I've got to git somebody to take Ed's place. The Colonel's got a band of five thousand cows he's goin' to move. I must fin' a boss I kin put the utmost confidence in; it is a big job. Will you accept the responsibility?"

Harry paused a moment to weigh the responsibility. "I will," he said resolutely.

"Till you're on the drive you kin room with me over at the house," invited Jack.

"I'd rather live in private, as I've be'n doin'."

"Say, Kid, didn't I say I'd be'n keepin' my eye on you?" Jack declared insinuatingly. Harry grew a little uneasy. "Do you punch cows fer fun?" Jack questioned,

"Not exactly. I like to be in the saddle."

"Like a respectable cowpony, or a hoss that will pitch plumb crazy?"

"Which do you prefer?"

Jack meditated, and he replied: "I don't keer which I have; I take 'em as they come. Why do you compare marriage with a pitchin' broncho?"

"Oh—because."

"That's a woman's answer, Kid," declared Jack.

"I don't know why I think marriage so tricky," faltered Harry.

"How do you know I was a right-handed man?"

"How do I know? 'Cause you wore yore 'gun' on yore right hip."

"A little observation. I, too, have be'n observin'."

"Have you?"

"I've noticed that you keep yore own company mos' the time, an' very seldom mix with the boys. When they go to town to have a good time, you don't join 'em. You don't smoke, chew, drink, swear, gamble, or take the leas' interes' in any of the coarse words they speak, an' rude jokes; but you always treat 'em with due respec' in yore daily work. Mos' of the boys like you. Yore frame's small an' shows no sign of great strength, but yore eyes show perseverance an' determination. The way you licked Green made us all sit up an' take notice. We never heard of a man a-doin' that way afore." Jack continued after a silence, "In crossin' a stream we take off our chaps. Why don't you, Kid?"

"'Cause—'cause I'm so bashful!" Harry grinned uncomfortably.

"Am I too deliberate in my suspicions?" Jack intimated.

"What do you mean, Jack?" Henry fearfully demanded.

"I mean, Kid, that clothes don't make a man!"

"I don't savvy what you're tryin' to git at," said Harry, becoming more uneasy and nervous.

"Kain't you guess, if you try real hard?"

"I'm not good at guessin'—not worth a cent!"

"But I am, Kid! Have you any objections to tellin' me why you're wearin' 'chaps' instead of petticoats?"

"Jack! You've found out—"

"Didn't I say I've be'n keepin' my eyes on you? You said, 'Marriage is like ridin' a pitchin' broncho.' I've broke some perty hard critters. Wonder if I could train you? You remember when I put the cinches on May an' Ed?" Jack put his arm about Harry's waist. "Will you let me do the same to you, Kid?"

"Let me go away," implored the girl brokenly, disengaging herself from his fond embrace.

"No, I want you to stay here and be my wife," said Jack tenderly. "I've liked you from the very first!"

"Jack," she cried, kneeling and clasping his hands, "I kain't merry you. That's why I'm wearing these 'chaps'!"

Jack drew her up into his arms and said: "Tell me about it, sweetheart!"

"I was engaged to—one, who was merried already. He fooled me. I kin never merry— I didn't know."

"What 's the man's name?" Jack demanded.

"He 's dead."

"Did you kill him?"

"No. I had another lover. He knew 'bout the scoundrel an' killed him; but got wounded himself an' died. He gave me this ring an' said, 'If any man asks you to merry him an' doubts you, show him this ring an' tell him I loved you! If he's a man he'll merry you!' "

"By jinks! that feller was all right! Both got killed?"

"Yes!"

"Must have be'n quite a shootin' match! Does yore folks know you 're here?"

"No. I ran away from home. I was only a little girl, jus' seventeen. That was five years ago, an' I've learned many lessons by experience, but, experience is a hard, hard schoolmaster!"

"The scoundrel deceived you?"

"I believed him—I trusted him!"

"Will you trust me?" implored Jack.

"I— I kain't, Jack, you're too good fer me. Oh! let me go— let me go!" begged the girl.

Jack held her fast. "Kid, whar you go I will go; yore life will be my life, an' yore heart will be mine, for— I love you!"

They heard the Colonel's voice.

Jack's father looked in at the open window, and saw Jack holding her in his arms. "Well! What's this?" he asked. "Never saw two men in such a position."

Jack pointed to the door that led to the cook's sleeping apartment. "Go into Betsy's room, put on her white dress, an' when you're ready, knock. I'll explain it to the Colonel."

"What if he objects?"

"Then, you an' I will go whar he kain't object! You're all mine!" and he kissed her fondly. "Now, hurry!"

As she left the room, the Colonel entered. "Where's Harry?" he asked.

"Gone."

"Gone where?"

"To put on her petticoats."

"Her petticoats?" gasped the bewildered Colonel.

"Shore. She's promised to be my wife," Jack explained incoherently.

"Your wife? Why has she be'n goin' roun' in 'chaps'?"

Jack told the sad story. The Colonel cleared his throat. There was a pause. "Father, have you any objections to my merryin' her?"

"H'm— Jack, marriage is a strange game. First of all, you mus' know the gal thoroughly you are to marry. You have only one chance: once tied, whether you live together or not, you're always tied. A woman drags you down or she lifts you up. If she's fallen an' you marry her, then, my boy, you're on a level with her!"

"Colonel, the woman I've asked to be my wife has be'n wronged! She was young an' she loved the villain that fooled her! Has she lost all faith in men? No! she loves me an' I love her. Show me the woman that loves a man who won't give in to him, an' I'll show you a worl' without life: a worl' that's dead!"

"Very true! very true! There are all kinds of women an' there are all kinds of men. If a good woman gits a bad man her life is thrown away. The same with a man. Be very careful when you choose; don't jump in blind-folded, you'll shorely rue the day!"

"I've watched my sweetheart every day. We became great chums. As a man I grew to like her very much! Now, that I've foun' out her secret, *I love her more than anythin' in the world!*"

"But, Jack, her pas' life—you know nothin' of it."

"What she was, I don't know. *What she is, I do know*! What she will be, I feel that shore I'll trust my future happiness to her! Instead of losin' faith in men—as a man would've lost in woman—she trusts me, after her awful experience. By jinks! if a woman ever treated me as that feller treated the Kid, I would have no faith in any of 'em!"

"I'm only warnin' you."

"You kain't expect more of a woman that you kin of a man. If a man's down we'll lend him a helpin' hand. Kain't we do as much fer a woman?"

"Yes; but what'll the people say?"

"The people be hanged! If any of the gossips dare to wag their tongues, I'll speak a few words that'll keep 'em busy fer the nex' six months! Oh, I pity a worl' that kain't forgive a woman that's suffered!"

"But, they will talk."

"They kin go plumb— I'll merry in spite of 'em!"

"Very well," said the Colonel, "you'll be doin' it 'gainst my will!"

"I've given my word to her, an' I'll keep it. Nothin' shall make me send that woman's soul to hell. I love her!"

There was a short pause.

"Jack, she mus' leave this ranch," declared the Colonel as he went toward the porch door, where he hesitated, half turned, then left without replying.

Jack was aroused by a light rap. He walked to the sleeping apartment door, opened it, and his sweetheart entered, dressed in white! She went to him with a smothered cry and he caressed her a moment in silence. "What name shall I call you, dear?" he asked presently.

"My right name is Kate Talbert."

"Kate Talbert," he repeated tenderly, stroking her hair.

After a short silence, she asked, "Where's the Colonel? Tell me—what do you mean? Where's the Colonel?"

"Gone out," Jack evaded.

But the girl understood.

"I thought so! I ain't fit to merry you, but I couldn't resis' when you asked me—'cause I love you! You made me fergit myself! Oh—I'm punished too hard! I can't stan' it!" She burst into tears.

"Don't cry, Kate," said Jack, leading her to a chair by the long pine table; "don't feel bad; I'm a-goin' to stan' by you! Let's put the past behind, an' we'll think only of the present an' future!"

"Jack, I love you! If anything should happen atween us now, I couldn't live! I've had 'nough disgrace and sorrow—"

"You're as good before God as any woman in New Mexico, and I'm a-goin' to make you my wife! Nothin' shall drive me from you! I love you, Kid!"

"But yore father?"

"When you're a-goin' to git on a wall-eyed bronc' an' he puts back his ears an' rolls his eyes, what do you know?" Jack asked.

"I know he's a-goin' to pitch," the girl replied wonderingly.

"When the Colonel goes out, not givin' me an answer, I know he's gone out into the air to cool off a bit. He'll do some mighty hard thinkin', an' he'll come back with a little common sense. The Colonel's no fool. He don't object to our marriage 'cause you've be'n sinned 'gainst, but because he's 'fraid of what the people will say."

"True, Jack, I'll hurt yore name. Why will you give up everythin' fer me?"

"'Cause you 're everything to me!" he said simply as he kissed her again and again.

"I never hoped to feel the joy of love again!" sobbed the happy girl.

"Ah, Kate, Clara taught me what a sacrificin' creature is woman! An' May taught me not to expect more of a woman than I would of a man."

"I'm 'fraid yore love is blind!" said Kate.

"'When love is blind
It puts bad faults behind;
And gives and takes,
But never breaks
The heart—when love is true,
It can see only you.'"

"Now, don't give me all the credit. I ain't no angel. I only come before you jus' as I am. I've tol' you the truth; but you'll trust me an' I'll be true to you, Kate, I shorely will."

After a pause, Kate declared, "The only thing

I'm 'fraid of is yore father. He might leave you out of his will!"

"I've earned my bread afore. I've worked hard from a little shaver. Guess I kin fin' a livin' somewhars on the range! I'll build a little log-cabin! We'll start with a few cows! I'll do the punchin' an' you'll be the boss! Some day we'll be cattle-kings! A hundred miles to the neares' railroad station; our neares' neighbor thirty miles away, who kin bother us? We kin live alone an' be happy! *Ah, that's livin'!*"

"Sweetheart, you've lifted a heavy load off my life! I feel that there's somethin' now to live for! You don't know how many times I was tempted to do 'way with myself. Often I'd think I'd fling myself into a river an' end my life! But now, Jack, you've made me happy—so very happy! The darkness has gone out of my life, an' the sun shines bright once more!" Again she kissed him.

"Every good woman I've ever met has taught me nobleness." declared Jack. "Every experience adds to my admiration for yore sex. A man kain't any more git along without a wife than a cowpuncher kin without his hoss. Sometimes the bronc' bucks, but he goes jus' the same, 'cause he don't like to feel the spurs in his ribs. Sometimes merried people 'pitch', but they go jus' the same, 'cause they're 'fraid of the law. That shouldn't be. Some hosses go 'cause they like to go. The same way with some merried people. They know what it is to live!"

"You're right, Jack: they know what it is to live. *We'll live! live! live!*"

They looked up as a tall form darkened the doorway, and the Colonel entered the mess-house.

"Well, father," said Jack cheerily, "you'll say good-bye to us and wish us luck, won't you?"

"You're not goin' to leave the old ranch?" the father pleaded.

"It's better so," suggested Jack.

"If I should ask you to stay?" implored the father.

"You mean—" Jack joyfully exclaimed.

"Harry, will you come to your father?" besought the Colonel. He kissed her blushing cheeks, and said: "Your husband ought to be very happy!"

"We are!" cried the happy girl, trembling with the exultation.

The father pushed her gently toward his son, and as the happy lovers clasped in loving embrace, he quietly left the room, with the tears running down his smiling cheeks.

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